

# Seeds sown for new fuel source

Pilbara indigenous communities are cultivating trial oil-seed crops to help refuel a Tom Price-based biodiesel production plant that is almost running on empty.

Commissioned in March, the plant's operators are looking to feed-stock crops for its future raw material needs after nearly draining the region of its recycled cooking oil.

Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Janet Brown said the plant was aiming to produce half a million litres of sellable biodiesel each year.

"Biodiesel offers regional communities the ability to establish their own production facility and reduce their reliance on petroleum diesel fuel and add value to their local communities," she said.

"Communities can manufacture their own biodiesel at a price significantly lower than petroleum-based diesel, which is a positive step for regional communities feeling the pinch of fuel prices."

The corporation has already committed to a fuel off-take agreement with Ashburton Shire Council

to produce 6000 litres a month to be used on plant and machinery.

It is also negotiating a similar agreement with mining giant Pilbara Iron and supplies the corporation's own vehicles with biodiesel fuel.

Pilbara Iron communities manager Michael O'Laughlin said it had reached an in principle agreement with its major fuel supplier BP and the Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation.

"Subject to the biodiesel meeting product quality standards and other requirements, the product could be blended with regular BP diesel product and provided to Pilbara Iron," Mr O'Laughlin said.

"We are excited about the project and can see the long-term economic benefits that will flow to the Pilbara and to Aboriginal communities in particular."

Ms Brown said the corporation could produce a litre of biodiesel for about 80 cents a litre and sold it to customers for 120c/litre.

"We are turning what is essentially a waste product into a cheap, alternative fuel source," she said.

"So far the project has been a real success and response from local government and industry has been fantastic.

"The reason we are exploring sustainable feed-stock crops is because we have almost gobbled up all the used vegetable oil available in commercial kitchens and mine sites from Port Hedland to Newman.

"We need to start looking to other sources of raw materials if the plant is to expand and keep up with demand."

Bellary and Wakathuni communities, both near Tom Price, will be the first to plant the trial lots of castor bush, Chinese tallow and saltbush.

The 'water friendly' oilseed plants will be planted in three to six hectare lots and would be cultivated and cropped by local Aboriginal people.

Bio Works Australia director Craig Lovelady said the trial crops would provide additional employment opportunities for the region's indigenous people.

"While we are still in the prelim-



Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation biodiesel trainees Verndon McDonald and Teokolal George with Bloworks Australia trainer Stefan Saw at the Tom Price production facility.

inary stages, if everything goes according to plan, there isn't a reason why we can't create jobs for the entire community," he said.

"Once we have established which crop produces the best result there is also no reason why we cannot expand this project to include some other remote Aboriginal communities.

"The real benefit is there is no prescriptive design for this project

and no need to dislocate the workforce from their family and community."

Mr Lovelady said the plant already employed six full-time indigenous trainees and others had completed its accredited training programs.

He said employee numbers were expected to increase further when the plant expanded to include its own quality control laboratory.