



Russel Thomson, left, a contractor with Rio Tinto's Hamersley Agricultural Project, and Marandoo project manager Doug Marshall. Picture: Colin Murty *Source: The Australian*

In a matter of months, this dusty patch of red dirt will be covered with green shoots as one of the world's biggest miners fulfils its ambition to become the nation's newest farmer.

When Rio Tinto considered digging iron ore below the Pilbara water table at Marandoo, a mine inside an excised portion of Western Australia's rugged Karijini National Park, it faced a dilemma.

The \$1.2 billion expansion at Marandoo is likely to release 35 gigalitres of water a year from the ground, and Rio cannot dump that much water into the park's waterways in case it kills fragile grasslands and the fauna that they support.

Instead, the world's second-largest iron ore miner decided to go into the hay-making business.

In the bright Pilbara sunshine yesterday, West Australian Agriculture Minister Terry Redman made the hour-long drive from Paraburdoo airport to Marandoo mine to turn on the tap at Rio Tinto's pioneering Hamersley Agricultural Project.

The occasional willy-willy sent dust through the air as Mr Redman launched what is essentially a \$140 million sprinkler system to turn the red earth into crops.

"It looks like it's harsh as hell out here," Mr Redman said. "But we know that some of the biggest agricultural areas in the world are in a hot climate like this: with infrastructure, it can work."

Rio Tinto will dig up to 180m below the surface of the earth to draw water down from the watertable and away from where it is mining. A total of 35km of pipeline, 22 pumps and 17 pivots will spray up to 7.5 million litres of water a day on to a seeded area of 85,000ha. The pivots can give the land a drenching equivalent to 13.6mm in 24 hours.

Mr Redman estimated there were 200 billion litres of excess mine water available in the Pilbara each year, 20 times the annual consumption of Western Australia's biggest fruit and vegetable growing region of Carnarvon.

"There is real potential for an agricultural legacy from the mining sector," he told The Australian.

"As below-water-table mining increases throughout the Pilbara, this will create a future source of significant volumes of water for a range of uses." With the west in the grip of an extraordinary dry spell that has brought record low rainfall across the state, Mr Redman said the water from mines represented an exciting opportunity to help the agriculture and food sector.

Rio Tinto has had some advice in its new venture from a farmer who learned to grow crops the traditional way.

Russel Thomson, 62, has been farming in Woodanilling in the state's southwest since 1973 and is contracted to plant Rhodes grass seeds at Marandoo. "The bugbear in farming is that you don't know when it is going to rain here, you control that," he said.

Rio Tinto is happy with its decision to use the water to grow stock feed, partly because the hay can be fed to cattle on the six stations it bought to ensure mine access.