

# fight with salinity

scale project. Mr Coaker said that was not the initial intention.

"It all began when we started draining our salt-affected land," he said.

"In doing that, we built open deep drains to lower the water table, and then pump the water back into the evaporation basins.

"We thought we could use these saline ponds to grow fish, but these fouled up with too much waste.

"We tried a few different things, but that these were unsuccessful."

Determined not to be beaten, Mr Coaker said he then sought the expertise of Gavin Partridge and Bruce Ginbey of the Australian Centre for Applied Aquaculture Research, part of Challenging Institute of Technology in Fremantle.

Dr Partridge has a PhD in inland saline aquaculture and Mr Ginbey is an aquaculture systems specialist.

Together, they helped the Coakers design the prototype for their current aquaculture system.

The system used by the Coakers is called a recirculating aquaculture system and is believed to be the biggest of its type operating in WA.

Even though, after several

hiccups, the system is now running smoothly. Mr Coaker said there was still much work to be done.

"We still have to refine our filtration system as we still have a few problems there," he said.

"We are also going to try a few other species that have been identified as being pretty good and we need to look at expanding our market base."

Because of the intensive feed requirements — the fish require feeding at least three times daily using formulated pellets — the Coakers have employed a full-time staff member.

Mr Coaker said the barramundi operation had helped towards reclaiming a 450ha block where the drainage system was contained.

Before the drain being installed, only about 301ha of this was arable, but this year a further 100ha or so had been planted with canola, Mr Coaker said.

"Most of the arable area is now back under cultivation, although still under duress," he said.

"Some of it will have to be planted to salttush due to the severity of the salinity."

To further aid the Coakers' fight against salinity, this year 26,000 trees and shrubs were planted along the drainage lines by Ian Pulbrook, of Greenoil

Tree Nursery, in Yandaranooka. Mr Pulbrook collects all the seed locally, ensuring all species planted are suited to the area.

Mr Coaker said the establishment process had been challenging and financial and time investment requirements had put pressure on the business.

But he expected going forward, the operation would be less time-intensive, and it would break even next year.

"The biggest challenge has been educating ourselves and putting a system together that works," he said.

"We did everything two or three times over before we could get it to work."

"But on the positive side, we have demonstrated we can grow a very good product."

"We have established the salt water fish will grow well here.

"That's been heartening."

With much of the hard work complete in establishing the system, Mr Coaker hopes to strike the right balance between his new aquaculture venture and his 9300ha cropping program, which this year includes wheat, canola, barley and lupins.

He has been under added pressure this year because of a particularly dry start to the growing season in the area.

The Coakers sold out of sheep earlier this year because they no



Evaporation basins at David Coaker's Morawa farm.

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## Govt boost for aquaculture

The Barnett Government has given aquaculture a boost, officially designating the fledgling industry as "strategically important" in a new policy statement.

Under the "statement of commitment", the Government undertakes to "recognise and support aquaculture as a legitimate use of the State's land and aquatic resources".

The policy statement pledges the Government to support the existing industry, establish new aquaculture zones, streamline or reduce regulation and strengthen the industry by offering longer-term leases and other Government support.

Fisheries Minister Ken Baston said the same demographic factors spurring investment in WA's beef production — a rising Asian middle class — were also in play for fresh seafood.

About 2000 tonnes a year of barramundi are produced in a special aquaculture zone in Cone Bay in the Kimberley, with the potential to grow to 20,000t.



Farm worker Daisy Lening, who hails from Estonia, feeds the two-month-old barramundi in a tank which can hold 12,000 juvenile fish.

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