

Aboriginals mine rich seam

Jodi Elston

Aboriginal people across the North-West will get a leg-up into the lucrative resources industry following the signing of a historic \$300 million mine management agreement.

Last week, BHP Billiton announced it had sealed the deal with indigenous company Ngarda Civil and Mining to operate BHP's Yarrie iron ore mine, 200km north-east of Port Hedland.

Ngarda executive chairman Barry Taylor said the move would help local Aboriginal people to break free of poverty and the Government welfare cycle.

In WA, the indigenous unemployment rate is 14 per cent, compared to the general rate of 3.3 per cent across the rest of the State.

He said it also locked-in a "very bright" future for the region's young people, who stood to gain meaningful career opportunities with the company.

"I am a local Njamal man, my father worked on Yarrie Station, and I have been with Ngarda since its inception — so personally this contract is very satisfying for me," Mr Taylor said.

"You cannot quantify what this contract means for my people.

"Currently the number of indigenous people in professional employment or upper management positions is very low — we are going to have to scour the entire country to find them — but this contract will give us the ability to change that.

"Over the next five years we will have the opportunity to change the

lives of many Aboriginal people and train them as apprentices, trainees and graduates."

Since 2001, Ngarda has won a number of significant contracts with big-name mining companies, including Pilbara Iron, Woodside, Chevron Texaco and BHP Billiton.

But Mr Taylor said this was the first time the company had been responsible for the day-to-day running of an entire mine site.

He said the company would be looking to employ workers across all areas of the mining operations and would not let indigenous employment levels fall below 50 per cent.

"There are currently about 90 people working at Yarrie mine, these workers will retain these jobs, but we will look to recruit from the local Aboriginal labour pool," Mr Taylor said.

"It is our hope that in a few years time, the Yarrie mine could boast majority Aboriginal employees — everyone from tradespeople, to administration to management."

In a bid to find the right people for the job, Ngarda and BHP Billiton will also work together to establish a training academy at the Yarrie Mine.

Students will get hands-on training in a variety of roles, including mobile and fixed plant, geology, drill and blast, catering and administration.

While the training academy is still being developed, it is expected it will primarily target community-based indigenous people who, in the past, have only had limited access to educational and employment opportunities.

Mr Taylor said the training academy would help indigenous people break through some of the barriers that prevented them entering the mining sector.

"One of the barriers is the criteria you need to enter a mine site and obviously with indigenous people there are major social problems like alcohol and drugs," he said.

"Licences are another barrier that stop our people getting into mining."

BHP Billiton Iron Ore president Ian Ashby said the contract would establish a new benchmark for the engagement of indigenous people across Australia.

"In future years I believe that we will look back at this as a turning point in the improvement of long-term opportunities for indigenous people in the Pilbara," he said.

"As a company we are committed to supporting indigenous communities and the Yarrie contract builds on the work we are doing across a range of areas to improve indigenous well-being through education, health and direct employment initiatives."

WA Premier Alan Carpenter said the contract was a significant indigenous employment opportunity.

"There's nothing that's been done like this before," he said.

"It provides, I think, a threshold opportunity for indigenous engagement not only in the resource sector of the West Australian economy but the broader West Australian economy on a scale we have not seen before."



Ngarda Civil and Mining executive chairman Barry Taylor, WA Premier Alan Carpenter and BHP Billiton Iron Ore president Ian Ashby.