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Kingsley Dixon says investing in mine site restoration has placed BHP Group ahead of the game. *Photo: Attila Cszaszar*

Seedbank drives mine site rehab

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The culmination of a five-year mine site rehabilitation project backed by BHP has created a slew of prospects for researchers and major mining companies.

Decommissioning a mine can be a complex and expensive process made more challenging by the need to rehabilitate surrounding land areas.

In Western Australia, legislation was passed in 2012 requiring holders of mining tenements to pay a levy to the Mining Rehabilitation Fund (compulsory from July 1 2014) in order to improve outcomes at existing and historical mine sites.

Given the sheer volume of rehabilitation work required in Western Australia's north, the \$5 million Pilbara-based Restoration Seedbank Initiative was launched in 2013 to help with this process.

That five-year research partnership between BHP Iron Ore, the Kings Park Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, and The [University of Western Australia](#) [6] culminated earlier this year.

Among the primary collaborators with the initiative was [Curtin University](#) [7] research associate at Kings Park, [Kingsley Dixon](#) [8].

[Professor Dixon](#) [8] told *Business News* that, after auditing the mining industry from 2007 to 2009, it became clear major companies didn't have the capacity to meet restoration demands.

"BHP was the only company in the end that made a value rather than a cost decision," [Professor Dixon](#) [8] said.

He said the research and development investment was potentially the largest in Australia to date.

The research team analysed a wide array of seed and soil issues in order to provide proven methods of restoring mine sites.

"We've been looking at the seed, what are the constraints on germination, what are the constraints on getting good quality seed," he said.

"Also, what sort of soils, because mine sites have very different soils to the rest of the system."

[Professor Dixon](#) [8] said the benefits of the research investment had been immense for BHP.

"It's put BHP light years ahead of anyone else," he said.

"They now know exactly what growth medium is necessary to get a native vegetation community established.

"Before that they were just putting seed out and getting it to grow some days, not other days.

"Now they know exactly what they need to do to begin risk managing their acreages."

The project also provided critical information to allow companies to better prepare to close mines, [Professor Dixon](#) [8] said.

"For the companies, they can more accurately begin costing mine closure, which has been and remains one of the big black holes in Australian industry," he said.

[Professor Dixon](#) [8] said the impact of the Restoration Seedbank initiative had been felt beyond its immediate collaborators, sparking interest from further afield.

"The [federal] government back in 2016 started its largest investment in mining restoration, which was built on the back of the Restoration Seedbank, and that's at full steam now," he said.

"That's looking at all the other mine sites that have differences, but using the Restoration Seedbank principles."

The \$6.5 million federal centre, which was set up under the Australian Research Council Centre for Mine Site Restoration, had brought about collaboration between BHP, Karara Mining, Sinosteel MidWest Corporation, and Hanson, as well as community engagement partner The Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia.

Traditional ownership

The Restoration Seedbank initiative has also provided business opportunities for traditional owners of the land.

[Professor Dixon](#) [8] said it was important to give traditional owners control of land restoration, and steps were now under way to make this process simpler and more effective for the companies involved.

“Three weeks ago we installed the first traditional owned and managed native seed farm in the Mid West, to start generating the first seed,” he said.

“We’re with the Gelganyem Trust, they’re the traditional owners that will be taking over the Argyle diamond mine – in two years time it gets put back to them.

“We’re going to link up with [the federal centre] to try and use fast-tracked science to get traditional owners developing a restoration business for the mine, as a way for all traditional owners to be engaged with mining restoration in WA.”

Instead of the mining company being given responsibility for restoration, [Professor Dixon](#) [8] said this new approach would mean collaboration with the [Curtin University](#) [7]-based restoration centre, which included researchers from UWA and Kings Park.

“This is about a genuine future for landowners, instead of them looking at these landscapes and just wanting to do something,” he said.

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