

14 March 2014

Committee Secretary  
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
via email [jscna@aph.gov.au](mailto:jscna@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Secretary

The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. The Corporation is a statutory authority of the Commonwealth Government and is a rural Research & Development Corporation within the Department of Agriculture portfolio.

RIRDC has a strong presence of research, development and extension (RD&E) investment in Northern Australia. We are also leading a Bid to the Commonwealth Cooperative Research Centre Program (CRC) for a Northern Agriculture (CRC). The CRC could play central role in informing prioritisation and implementation of the Federal Government's objectives for the north.

The key points of this submission are:

- The **Northern Agriculture CRC Bid** has strong support from the Western Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory governments. Industry funding is also being secured from rural research and development corporations, agricultural companies and agribusiness.
- Barriers to agricultural development in the north will be addressed by the CRC with a strong focus on market demand for northern products. Transformative economic development models which reduce investment risk and attract capital will be developed and improvements to policy and regulation identified.
- RIRDC has funded a study into **supply chain and infrastructure needs in Northern Australia**. The work will provide clear indications of medium and longer term opportunities for agricultural production across northern Australia and will identify the critical supply chain and infrastructure investment issues that need to be addressed.
- The **Indigenous Pastoral Project (IPP)** is lead by RIRDC on behalf of the Federal Department of Agriculture its focus has been to help Indigenous pastoral businesses become commercially viable and sustainable.
- **Kakadu Plum** is an indigenous super food which offers economic development opportunities for indigenous communities. There are however many unknowns about how to increase productivity, ensure quality, harvest and storage to achieve its market potential. RIRDC is supporting RD&E however more investment is needed.



## **RIRDC's Role**

RIRDC invests in research, development and extension (RD&E) which increases the productivity and profitability of rural industries. We manage RD&E for small important industries such as rice, chicken meat, horses and honeybees. We also support the RD&E needs of a number of developing industries/commodities important to Northern Australia including native and commercial rice, biofuels (sweet sorghum), crocodile, buffalo, exotic tropical fruits, and indigenous products.

RIRDC also undertakes research of national importance across the rural sector. This cross-sectoral role is a unique competency of RIRDC through which we undertake research in to road transport trends, supply chains, foreign investment, communications and broadband, demographics in agriculture, work place health and safety and regional development.

The Corporation recognises that development of agriculture in northern Australia is in the national interest; not only to respond to growth in demand for food and other products in Asia but also to ensure that northern regional communities are supported by sustainable, long term rural industries which diversify economic development, create employment, and build education, skills and training.

RIRDC has significant knowledge about agriculture in northern Australia, in this submission we have focused on four activities: A bid for a Northern Agriculture Cooperative Research Centre; supply chains in Northern Australia; the Northern Indigenous Pastoral Project; and the development of Kakadu Plum as an indigenous industry.

### **Northern Agriculture Cooperative Research Centre Bid (refer Attachment 1)**

RIRDC is leading a consortium of the Western Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory governments, CSIRO and northern universities to make a bid to the Commonwealth Cooperative Research Centre Program. The Bid will be submitted in early July 2014. Attached is the Business Case (Attachment 1). The proposed CRC has strong support from industry, governments, CSIRO, northern research institutions and Indigenous representatives, and will be backed by significant public and private sector funding and in-kind support.

Northern agricultural companies, banks, mining companies, the beef, grains, horticulture and aquaculture industries have been consulted and are expected to invest.

The CRC can play a central role in providing new knowledge and information which can assist implementation of government priorities in the north. The CRC will focus on transformational economic development with a strong focus on where the drivers of demand are for northern agricultural products.

Importantly, it will work to ensure mistakes of the past are not repeated, and that those business models which have been proven to be resilient and successful in the north can be replicated. During the development of this Bid RIRDC has consulted widely with the people committed to and experienced in, northern agriculture. Many have told us that many of the production barriers are being overcome as experience and knowledge about operating in the north strengthens

However there are a number of region wide issues which still need to be addressed, for example:

- Legislative, policy and regulatory requirements which impede development;
- the absence of business models which suit northern conditions;
- water resources, infrastructure and transport planning;
- agricultural business opportunities for indigenous communities;
- the need for supply chains which leverage off the regions proximity to Asia;
- building and attracting a workforce with the required skills.

The CRC could be the hub which undertakes public and private sector RD&E which addresses these issues and supports policy implementation and investment prioritisation in northern Australia.

### **Northern Indigenous Pastoral Project (Attachment 2)**

RIRDC has lead the Indigenous Pastoral Project on behalf of the Department of Agriculture as part of the Australian Government's Northern Australia Sustainable Futures program. The project has been undertaken during the last two years.

The aim of the Indigenous Pastoral Project (IPP) was to help Indigenous pastoral businesses become commercially viable and sustainable. Central to the project was the production of a step-by-step manual which assists Indigenous pastoral enterprises and Indigenous land owners wishing to establish pastoral businesses.

Minister Joyce launched the manual at the northern beef forum in Broome in late February 2014.

The manual incorporates the many resources, extension materials, and training programs already available, and can be updated as required. Case studies of successful Indigenous pastoral businesses are also included, which are aimed to assist in engendering community support and engagement of Indigenous youth in the Indigenous pastoral industry, as well as demonstrate some of the many pathways to success. Attachment 3 gives more information of this project. Attachment 2 gives more information.

Extensive consultation was undertaken with several stakeholder groups, including:

- Indigenous pastoral communities, including groups that have entered into PLUA's with non-Indigenous landholders;
- Indigenous pastoral companies;
- Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC);
- Jurisdiction extension officers and trainers; and
- Non-Indigenous pastoralists (focusing on properties who already work with Indigenous communities).

RIRDC continues to work with the Department of Agriculture to ensure that the maximum impact and benefit of this project can be realised for northern Indigenous pastoralists.

### **Kakadu Plum for Indigenous Economic Development**

Kakadu Plum is a super food indigenous to northern Australia. A number of studies have identified the potential of Kakadu Plum as a native food product and additive. The nutritional and potential cosmetic uses of Kakadu Plum have been known for years, it can already be found in some health food products and there continues to be interest in its commercialisation. For example work is being

undertaken to use Kakadu plum in value added seafood products by the Queensland government and the Seafood CRC.

There are however a number of barriers to the development of Kakadu Plum which include:

- Wild harvest as the primary collection technique, this brings issues of consistency in quality, volume, supply and storage;
- The genetic base of Kakadu Plum is variable across regions with not all Kakadu Plum carrying the sought after nutritional and quality attributes; and
- Its primary use is by Indigenous communities producing food products such as chutneys and jams, without growth pathways in those communities for those products.

RIRDC is collaborating with CSIRO and Indigenous communities to overcome these barriers through creation of orchards that will map and store the genetic diversity of Kakadu Plum and to test and further develop the concept of enrichment planting to address volume and quality issues. This is a long running project which is also training local communities to improve harvest, quality and storage outcomes.

### **Supply Chains in Northern Australia**

This is a joint activity between RIRDC, the Federal Government; Queensland, NT and WA Governments; Regional Development Australia Pilbara Committee; ABARES; and CSIRO.

The study will provide Federal, State and Territory governments with a clear indication of medium and longer term opportunities for agricultural production across northern Australia and will identify the critical supply chain and infrastructure investment issues that can be addressed to help foster opportunities being realised. The broad market opportunities for a group of agricultural commodities, their risks and options, including long term growth prospects will be described. The operational and infrastructure elements of the supply chain required to support them and improve their longer term prospects will also be identified.

### **Conclusion** (Attachment 3)

In conclusion, the initiatives discussed in this submission demonstrate RIRDC's competency as an RD&E investor in northern Australia. We have many other projects underway, refer Attachment 3 which are valuable to the region.

We would be very happy to appear before your Inquiry to provide more information about our submission.

Yours sincerely,



**Anwen Lovett**  
**Acting Managing Director**

