



**Regional
Development**
Australia

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Dr Bill Pender
Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
via email: jscna@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr Pender

RE: Submission to the Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia

Regional Development Australia Northern Territory (RDA NT) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into the development of Northern Australia.

RDA NT facilitates regional development across the Northern Territory. We work across the three tiers of government and with non-government stakeholders to deliver sustainable development outcomes and plan for a secure and prosperous future for the region.

With the exception of the Northern Territory Government, RDA NT is the only organisation with all-encompassing responsibilities for regional development across the Northern Territory. RDA NT has diverse stakeholder relationships, allowing us to be an independent voice for our region and to act as a catalyst for regional development activity. All RDA NT initiatives, including this submission, are informed by extensive consultation with regional stakeholders including government, peak industry bodies, and community organisations.

In writing this submission we are conscious that the Joint Select Committee will be considering a large number of submissions. We do not, therefore, aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the region's challenges and strategic advantages. This detail is available in the *RDA NT Regional Plan 2013-2016*, available at www.rdant.com.au, and elsewhere¹. Instead we focus on a few key areas to give a sense of the short and long-term opportunities. Read in conjunction with the submissions from our regional partners we anticipate that this will contribute to a cohesive and inspiring insight into a region with exciting development potential.

We anticipate that the members of the Parliamentary Committee and the staff who make up the Taskforce are already aware of the major constraints and aspirations which are largely common across Northern Australia. The residents of Northern Australia want better transport infrastructure (by which many just mean a passable road) and they want reliable telecommunications (often simply the ability to send an email or receive a text message). Like all Australians, they desire affordable housing and reliable essential services, ready access to quality education and health services, and a diversity of employment opportunities to support happy families and healthy communities. We also want to protect our environment so that current and future generations can catch a barra or hike through unique natural landscapes.

Because these broad issues are largely known, rather than providing an investment wish-list we have endeavored to outline some of the "pathways to harness opportunities which capitalise on the region's strengths", as described in the terms of reference. We have highlighted three key themes in this submission, each reflecting regional priorities but also relating directly to the White Paper terms of reference.

- We discuss the importance of local input into the development of Northern Australia and strategies to drive transformational change from the ground up.
- We explore the opportunities for agricultural development in the Northern Territory in the context of real impediments.
- And we take a closer look at what development might mean for one region, Central Australia, which is both geographically and logistically the foundation of Northern Australia.

Unleashing potential through empowerment and autonomy

RDA NT and regional stakeholders are hopeful that the Northern Australia White Paper will describe a positive and unifying vision for Northern Australia, realising untapped potential and balancing interests. **For us, success is dependent on securing not only bipartisan but also cross-sectoral support for a strategic, integrated, and long-term plan. It is also crucial that this plan translates into action, both in the near term and building momentum over time. For this hope to be realised the White Paper must be informed by local input, have strong regional ownership and include effective mechanisms for cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral delivery.**

¹ See for example, Regional Australia Institute 2013 *'Rethinking the future of northern Australia's regions: more than mines, dams and development dreams'*

The development of Northern Australia must be based on a locally inspired vision for a sustainable and distinctive region. We need to set the bar high and aspire to be more than a resource base to support southern Australia. We have the opportunity to learn lessons from the past and be creative in ensuring an equilibrium between economic, social, cultural and environmental measures of success. RDA NT applauds the recognition in the terms of reference to learning from past mistakes and managing impediments to growth, in this regard we need to exploit academic and applied best practice. Indeed, as a first world nation with exceptional natural assets, a skilled and multicultural human resource base, intellectual talent and an inventive spirit we have a responsibility to shape our region into something extraordinary.

The people best placed to both design and drive this vision are the residents of Northern Australia, including the regions first people. Planning the development of the north from the offices of southern Australia has always been, and continues to be, an underlying problem. While the Northern Australia Strategic Partnership is precisely the right starting point for ensuring local input and improved collaboration, this merely represents the top of the necessary governance structure². Coordination of effort across governments is key but it is also clear that governments alone will not develop Northern Australia. The scale of the challenge requires effort across public and private sectors and at all levels. As with any transformational project, it will largely be the non-government sectors that do the heavy lifting so it is important that these stakeholders are included at every stage of the process.

Ultimately the success or failure of the White Paper process will depend on having an early eye on the end game. **The aim of the Inquiry is not the development of a White Paper; it is the development of a very large and complex region, to ensure that both current and future generations of Australians share Northern Australia's economic, natural and cultural wealth. To achieve this aim the policy must be underpinned by a costed and time-bound implementation plan, founded on a well-considered process and ensuring the engagement of locals in the development and delivery of policy outputs.** The measure of success will not be a well-crafted report, success will be measured by practical on-ground changes leading towards the realisation of a shared vision for the region.

Realising the potential for sustainable northern agriculture

Recognition of the need to advance trade and investment links with our northern neighbors' in the Asia-Pacific region is one of the most exciting elements of the Northern Australia policy initiative. There are many ways the Territory can contribute towards this outcome but one clear opportunity is to grow our agricultural sector. However, a historic disconnect between southern expectations of the North's agricultural capacity and on-ground realities must be identified and addressed at the outset. There are primary production success stories to build on but there are also challenges such as land availability, land capability, water resource management, pest and disease management, access to skilled and unskilled labour, and high (and increasing) input costs.

² Allan Dale 2013 'Governance Challenges for Northern Australia'

RDA NT is conscious that the Territory's ability to offer large scale development opportunities, akin to the Western Australian Ord and the Queensland Flinders and Gilbert regions, is limited. Across the Territory there are many opportunities for intensive horticulture, broad-scale agriculture, and improved pasture but few are of a "food-bowl" scale. However, a more dispersed production base can still contribute towards significant economic development outcomes, and may offer greater economic diversification benefits and improved sustainability. Accumulated science and wisdom in the north supports this "mosaic" pattern of production³.

There is a great deal to be learned from history and there is also a growing body of valuable research, however there is still a great deal we don't know about how to successfully grow food in the wet dry tropics and the arid zone. Successful development across the agricultural sector will depend on investment in regionally relevant research. It is also critical to build extension services to ensure the uptake and practical application of findings and maximise the benefits to the industry and to the economy. Research will also support investment, facilitating evidence based decision making by government and by the private sector. RDA NT cannot overstate the importance of the proposed Northern Agriculture CRC to realising the potential for sustainable northern agriculture.

Another element of the White Paper discussion which has vast potential to influence agricultural development in the north is regulatory reform. This incorporates a wide spectrum of possible initiatives, from facilitating native title processes⁴ through to improving development assessment and approval processes to ensure sensible and sustainable development. As price takers producers depend more than most sectors on an equalizing regulatory environment, taxation reform, trade agreements, supportive immigration policy, assisted supply chains, and rebates on major inputs such as diesel and fertiliser will all directly influence the viability of investment in the North's agricultural sector.

Central Australia – the potential of the heartland

One point which RDA NT wishes to emphasise strongly is the importance of including Alice Springs within the definition of Northern Australia. Although it is understood that this is the intent, it is not consistently explicit in the definition. **From a Northern Territory perspective, planning the development of Northern Australia without the inclusion of Alice Springs is neither practical nor desirable.** Alice Springs is a major service center with logistical importance in connecting the north and south of Australia. The ongoing development of the Outback Highway will build on the town's role as a national hub, assisting with critical east-west linkages. Furthermore, from a Territory perspective, it is very important that the development of Northern Australia does not exacerbate a north-south divide within the Northern Territory.

³ Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce 2009 'Sustainable development of northern Australia: A report to Government from the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce'

⁴ CSIRO 2013 'Land Tenure in northern Australia: Opportunities and challenges for investment'

Alice Springs may only be a town of 25,000 people but it is the “city” of Central Australia. Alice Springs and the Central Australian region represent a prime opportunity to build on existing innovative and often sector-leading changes in research, technology and enterprise. Opportunities for economic development in the region include arid zone agriculture, new mining investment, and the evolution of tourism services to accommodate changing international demands. However, Alice Springs also has significant expertise and infrastructure in emerging fields, including renewable energy research and application and Indigenous enterprise and cultural inclusion strategies. These fields are of direct relevance in terms of developing the semi-arid and arid zones of Northern Australia.

This small town has disproportional significance at a national scale, it is simply hard to contemplate the Australian landscape without Alice Springs at the center. Alice Springs has a clear geographic strategic advantage which is yet to be fully employed. For example, as Northern Australia grows there will be a greater need for mitigative strategies in the event of disasters such as tropical cyclones, Alice Springs may be the perfect information technology hub for the region. Central Australia also has other strengths on which to build, in particular in relation to the regions large and growing Indigenous population. A historically negative emphasis fails to recognise that Indigenous culture is one of the region’s most valuable assets and an under utilised resource.

If there is one thing holding this region back, it is a lack of direction resulting from the absence of a cohesive and long-term vision. As a starting point, Alice Springs and the surrounding region needs a comprehensive plan to facilitate a consistent and coordinated approach to realising the region’s potential. The plan must be built, in the context of reconciliation and collaboration, on the wisdom and principles of its first residents. To date, the development of Alice Springs has been ad hoc and reactive. We need to replace the current “problem and solution approach” with an inspiring vision for a unique and thriving community that recognises and embraces its strategic advantages and builds on its existing strengths. There are many development opportunities in the region, but realising this potential will depend on a coordinated and consistent approach.

In the interests of being succinct and keeping the early discussion focused on opportunities rather than needs, there is a great deal left out of this submission. RDA NT has collaborated with a number of other representative groups in the development of their submissions, including the:

- Northern RDA Alliance;
- NT Farmers Association;
- Broadband for the Bush Alliance; and
- Kimberley to Cape Network.

We have also provided input to the Northern Australia Taskforce during consultations in January (see attached). Relevant topics which we have not addressed in this submission include the potential of enabling infrastructure to boost economic development in the region, and the need for landscape scale planning (including where appropriate across jurisdictions).

RDA NT is happy to expand on our submission or assist the Inquiry and the Green and White Paper process in any way we can. We look forward to participating in public hearings. We will continue to facilitate regional stakeholder engagement across a spectrum of interest groups and we encourage you to use us as a key resource within your consultative framework.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on 08 8941 7550. RDA NT welcomes ongoing engagement with the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee and the Northern Australia Taskforce to progress this exciting initiative.

Yours sincerely



Kate Peake
EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Regional Development Australia NT



An Australian Government Initiative