

## **Tablelands Regional Council's role in the development of North Australia**

### ***Summary***

*The people and resources of the Tablelands Regional Council's (TRC) local government region are uniquely placed to serve as a focal point for the development of North Australia at minimal cost to governments. In terms of resources the region has a large area of fertile under utilised land eminently suited for a range of cropping or animal husbandry activities south and east of Mt Garnet and Ravenshoe (Southern Atherton Tablelands) and an assured water supply from the Herbert River and other sources.*

*The nearby developed section of the region (centred on Atherton) has farmers and pastoralists with, in many cases, generations of practical expertise and who are supported by long established agents, suppliers and consultants specialising in developing and maintaining rural enterprises in North Australia.*

*It is envisaged that provided some obstacles can be overcome (primarily those associated with current tree clearing laws, tenure and water availability) a start could be made using existing infrastructure, supply chains and expertise. Private investors may provide most if not all the capital. Governments' role would be primarily to initiate a scoping study, facilitate removal of the obstacles mentioned above and keep up with the servicing demands which would spring from those arriving to gain employment as the project developed.*

*This project would build up the practical, technical and financial expertise which would branch out into those regions of North Australia where there are the physical resources for greatly increased development but that are not as fortunate as the proposed Southern Atherton Tablelands Development Area in terms of existing infrastructure, supply chains or readily available expertise. Development in other fields such as tourism will inevitably piggyback on the infrastructure established for agriculture.*

### **1. Introduction**

It has long been obvious to many Australians, especially those who have spent their lives in North Australia, that for one reason or another, many opportunities for further economic development have been bypassed or projects commenced have not yet reached anywhere near their full potential. In this submission Tablelands Regional Council (TRC) suggests the adoption of a development strategy based on scoping studies to identify one or more focal or starting points for accelerated development. The overall objective would be to maximise return on investment while minimising public expenditure. Agriculture is obviously the best long term basis for development as it tends to be less ephemeral than other activities such as mining and mineral processing. Tourism might be seen as having potential but experience suggests that it will never achieve significant scale without the infrastructure which can be provided by agriculture.

## **2. Focal Point Characteristics**

Ideally focal points would have the following features:-

- a. be an undeveloped area of significant size and tenure and where the agricultural potential, if not proved, is at least well documented.
- b. where there are good possibilities that any legislative impediments (especially those relating to tenure and land clearing) can be resolved.
- c. the potential to supply at least part of the area with water for irrigation.
- c. be not too far removed from existing infrastructure - roads with B-double or better capability, rail, ports, airfields, service towns.
- d. a potential workforce with a mix of demonstrated practical, entrepreneurial, innovative and technical skills relevant to agricultural development in North Australia.

Once identified and prioritised, expressions of interest for the development of selected focal point areas can be canvassed from entrepreneurs and plans for an expansion to nearby areas, developed.

TRC suggests that a prime focal point is the Southern Atherton Tablelands. Notes on the characteristics of this region and its suitability in terms of the parameters provided above, follow.

## **3. Prime Focal Point - Proposed Southern Atherton Tablelands Development Area**

### **a. Geography**

The area of interest lies within the TRC local government area to the south of the town of Ravenshoe and to the east of the town of Mt Garnet (Map 1). The area of about 3000 km<sup>2</sup> is predominately flat to gently undulating. Ancient basalt flows cover much of the underlying Tertiary land surface. It is dissected by the south flowing Herbert River. The elevation varies from almost 1000m in the north east to 600m in the south.

### **b. Natural environment**

Temperature - Mean maximum January temperature for Ravenshoe (elevation 870 m) is 28 degC; January mean minimum is 20 degC. Similar July temperatures are 24 and 13 degC. Occasional frosts occur during the cooler part of the dry season when the sky is clear and the humidity low.

Rainfall - The rainfall has a strong summer seasonal pattern. The highest annual averages are in the north-east (e.g. Koombaloomba Dam - 2763 mm).

The western part of the region is considerably drier with annual averages of 600 - 800 mm. Cyclones occur occasionally but are of lower frequency and intensity than those nearer the coast.

Soils - Most of the soils are derived from weathered basalt. They are described in the Queensland Agricultural Audit - Chapter 6 - Far North Queensland (2013) as ranging from alluvials, deep red and yellow kandosols, chromosols, grey sodosols and other cropping soils.

Water - The whole of the upper catchment of the Herbert River lies within the TRC area. The Herbert in its upper middle reaches flows south through the area before turning eastwards and eventually reaching the Coral Sea near Ingham. It has an annual average discharge of 3,647,000 ML. 115,000 ML is currently allocated to water users. A number of studies examining the future utilization of this resource for irrigated agriculture have been undertaken in the past and seem worthy of re-examination and updating.

c. Agricultural potential

A description of the agricultural potential of this area is contained within the 2013 Queensland Agricultural Land Audit - Chapter 6 - Far North Queensland. In summary it suggests that over 100,000 ha of the area is suitable, in large part if not in whole, for sugar cane, broad acre cropping, annual horticulture, perennial horticulture, intensive animal production and forestry. While there are currently small areas under crops such as maize and peanuts in the northern sector, most of it is used for extensive grazing.

d. Human resources

The Southern Atherton Tablelands is sparsely populated. However, the Tablelands to the north Ravenshoe have supported intensive agricultural activities specially dairying and cropping in some form or another for over 100 years. Farms have been in many instances owned and operated by families for four generations. Current crops include maize, mangos, bananas, potatoes, avocados, sugar cane, peanuts, hay and blue berries. Animal husbandry activities undertaken are beef, dairy, chicken meat and pork production. With changing markets over past years, most farmers have had to be innovative with many new crops being grown. After trials, some have been abandoned as uneconomic (e.g. ti-tree) while other (e.g. avocados) have boomed. The value of the depth of this expertise cannot be overlooked especially in terms of new agricultural developments where practical know-how and the ability to be innovative, are farming skills that are at a premium if success is to be achieved.

At a service level agricultural consultancies operate within the region. They are supported by the representatives of a range of agricultural chemical and fertilizer companies. Local, inter- and intrastate produce agents are well versed in the logistics of getting Atherton Tablelands' farm produce to both domestic and overseas markets.

As development expands beyond the region and becomes more complex, we foreshadow that it may become necessary to establish on the Tablelands an institution capable of supplying the additional research, extension and manpower needs to ensure continued expansion into more remote areas where the agricultural potential is currently not as well understood and infrastructure, manpower and capital requirements seem more difficult to meet.

#### e. Infrastructure

Service towns - Ravenshoe (pop. approx. 1800) lies near the northern edge of the proposed Development Area. It has two hotels, the normal range of commercial premises usually available in a small town, primary and secondary schools and a saw mill. Medical services are limited to a GP's surgery, hospital clinic, pharmacy and ambulance station. Emergency cases are taken by ambulance to Atherton or flown out to Atherton, Cairns or Townsville. The small town of Mt Garnet is a centre for tin and other base metal mines located in the immediate vicinity. It has a hotel, general store, primary school, tourist centre, police station and ambulance station; Innot Hot Springs has a hotel and caravan/tourist park. The largest town in the area is Atherton (pop. approx. 7000) 48 km to the north on the Kennedy Highway.

Roads - The Kennedy Highway runs generally south-west from just north of Cairns, through Mareeba and Atherton to Ravenshoe, Mt Garnet and beyond. This Highway is a road train route south of Mt Garnet. Innisfail is 78 km from Ravenshoe on the Palmerston Highway, a b-double route.

Rail - Although there is a seldom used line passing 50 km to the west of the area (Cairns to Forsayth line) and abandoned lines to Ravenshoe and Mt Garnet, the nearest rail terminal for most purposes would be Innisfail.

Airfields - A TRC controlled and gravel surfaced airfield is on the outskirts of Mt Garnet. The nearest international airport capable of handling international cargo is near Cairns about 140 km from Ravenshoe. It seems possible that the Mareeba airstrip might be upgraded to enable the export of agricultural crops in the longer term.

Ports - Mourilyan Harbour, just to the south of Innisfail is primarily used as a bulk terminal for the export of sugar, molasses and more recently timber.

Energy - The high voltage line from Central to North Queensland passes along the eastern edge of the proposed Development Area. Some potential exists in the area for the further development of hydro power. Geothermal power might be possible given the presence of hot springs which are found many places across the base of Cape York Peninsula immediately to the west.

#### f. requirements

Initially it is envisaged that most of the capital for service roads, clearing and land preparation will be provided by developers. The State might be able to offset some of the expenditure which will be required for the preparatory scoping work, by converting to freehold and selling some of the potential farming land that is currently pastoral lease. Although capital requirements in terms of weirs and or dams will not be known until the scoping studies have been completed, a reasonable start in selected areas might be made by dry land farming or using stream-side pumps for irrigation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There would appear to be many advantages to identifying areas within Northern Australia which have the attributes required to serve as focal points for the accelerated development of the whole region. With this in mind, the resources of the Southern Atherton Tablelands present an outstanding opportunity with available land, water, substantial existing infrastructure and an extensive nearby bank of highly experienced and innovative farmers.

Tablelands Regional Council believes that the development we have described above could proceed with minimal delay and at minimal cost to State and Federal Governments. The experience gained would have significant relevance to vast tracts of Northern Australia.

We commend our proposal to the Committee and would be pleased to complement this submission with any further detail that might be required.