



Northern Territory Horticultural Association

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The Northern Territory Horticultural Association (NTHA) is the peak representative body for the horticultural industry in the Northern Territory. The NTHA represents commodity groups including mangos and other tropical fruits, vegetables and cucurbits, citrus, nurseries and cut flowers.

In a climate of considerable change a key function of the NTHA is to support growers to meet future challenges and facilitate strategic planning aimed at the promotion, growth and sustainability of the industry. Long term horticultural development depends on striking a balance between horticultural production and the security of the natural environment. Now is the time to start investing in mechanisms to support sustainable practices for the benefit of the industry, the community and the planet.

This submission reflects the long-term strategic direction of the Territory's horticultural sector. It is more critical than ever to spread the message that investment in sustainable agriculture is an investment in our future.

There is a wonderful opportunity for growth in the Territory's horticultural sector if we start investing now for development in a 20 year timeframe and if we learn from the past. The key is to be proactive rather than reactive.

New opportunities for development in the north, based on sustainable water use (including non-consumptive uses)

Background

Horticulture is a relatively young but rapidly developing industry in the Northern Territory. It is hypothesized that climate change and poor sustainability practices elsewhere in Australia, along with increasing food security concerns, are likely to result in continuing expansion of the Territory's horticultural industry. It is therefore timely to consider what potential exists for sustainable agricultural development in Northern Australia. The short answer is that there is enormous potential. But with the clear acknowledgement that development must be based on a long-sighted strategic approach and good science. Expansion without adequate planning and support will result in the misuse of resources, as it has done elsewhere.

Development Opportunities

The Territory represents approximately 17% of the Australian land mass, most of which remains largely undeveloped and ecologically intact. Although relatively little of this area is under production, or is likely to be productive in the future for a range of reasons, the existing industry is evidence of the capacity for intense and sustainable horticultural production. The rural Darwin, Katherine, Douglas Daly and Ti Tree areas provide a range of geographic and climatic conditions conducive to growing a variety of produce, and opportunities exist for horticultural development in other areas including Ali Curung, Elliott and other remote communities. While opportunities exist they have not been well assessed.

Limitations of Development

The full capacity of the wet/dry tropics and the arid regions for food production is still poorly understood. One limiting factor will be the availability of water, despite the southern myth of a boundless water resource. There are other limiting factors which are more or less understood. With the spotlight falling on Northern Australia predominantly as a result of environmental catastrophes in Southern Australia the focus here must be on sustainable development. Investment in sustainable agricultural systems should be prioritised as a strategic investment in our future. Initially this investment needs to focus on the skill base to undertake R&D so that we build on a platform of knowledge and avoid the mistakes of the past.

Benefits of Development

There has been much debate about the development of our unique environment, but ultimately horticulturalists provide staple food produce and there are many benefits to producing food at a local level. These benefits are likely to be highlighted in the context of increasing environmental pressures, an expanding local and global population and economic instability. The climate and geography is conducive to many crops and history suggests that development within environmental boundaries can achieve true sustainability. With domestic food security an increasing concern now is the time to start developing resilient food production systems that can meet future needs and respond to challenges.

The potential impacts of new developments

Planning

With increasing pressure on the food producing capacity of Northern Australia now is the time to plan for agricultural development. Unfortunately, at present, there is little forward planning, and despite the best intentions of growers this is likely to result in negative environmental outcomes. Consideration needs to be given now to the long term needs of the horticultural industry, including the identification and preservation of suitable land and the assessment of water availability. There will, no doubt, be competition for both land and water but the more these issues are examined broadly and with a long term perspective the less the likelihood of antagonism and poor judgement. Planning environmentally healthy and productive regions will depend on ongoing and effective communication between the various stakeholders; land and business owners, non-government organisations and government agencies.

Research

The future development of Northern Australia must be based on detailed and ground-truthed land capability assessments. The science needs to be undertaken to confirm that the natural resources exist to sustain proposed development. In the Territory expansion and/or rejuvenation of infrastructure is necessary to allow for research in collaboration with Queensland, Western Australia and the countries of South East Asia. Government has significantly reduced its investment in agricultural research and development over the past 20 years, hopefully the next 20 will see a much needed resurgence in interest and funding. Research will invariably promote a mosaic form of development given the variability of the climate and resources within the landscape, including water. An expanded knowledge base will underpin optimal crop selections relative to the known available resources and therefore the development of resilient and sustainable production systems.

The Challenge

Ecologically sustainable farming systems are possible with the appropriate investment in planning and research. Such farming systems, through the conservation of our natural environment, the maintenance of commercial competitiveness and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, are capable of maintaining productivity indefinitely. The challenge will be developing farming systems that are more intrinsically Australian, that:

- are resilient in the face of extreme weather and extreme seasonal variability;
- are conserving of water and energy;
- maintain groundcover and are kind to the soil;
- sit lightly on the landscape and don't displace native wildlife or habitat;
- are highly profitable in good seasons and don't lose money in bad seasons;
- preserve and build their natural, human and financial capital;
- recover quickly from shocks and stress;
- attract and retain young, talented people on the land;
- generate jobs and income in regional communities; and
- produce high quality, healthy foods in high demand, for good prices.

New governance and institutional arrangements for the effective management of water resources

The Triple Bottom Line

Increasingly the community is demanding integrated decision making. The triple bottom line concept has been around for many years but the growing immediacy of environmental issues is improving public consciousness of the interrelated nature of economic, social and environmental needs. The future of Northern Australia depends on our ability to work together to maximise opportunities and minimise negative outcomes. What this means is that, when considering the development of Northern Australia, a balance will need to be struck between the interests of various stakeholders, not least being the interests of agriculturalists and environmentalists.

Environment v's Development

Having said this, the common debate which stages the environment and development as opposing forces is misleading. Strategic development has environmental benefits. Sustainable agricultural practices meet the dual needs of production and natural resource management and good farmers are also good land managers, protecting the environment on which their livelihood depends. Furthermore, more than ever, it is important to create confidence amongst the general population that produce is not grown at the expense of the environment. For these reasons, as well as the indisputable need to feed the community, environmental concerns should guide, not inhibit, expansion of the industry.

A Framework

Clearly striking a balance when determining land use is complicated and the challenge for both government and industry is to develop a framework which is accepted by all stakeholders. This framework needs to be broad enough to encompass the many facets and complexities of land management, while also being simple enough to be a useful tool for the layman on the ground. Explicit and transparent acknowledgement of the "trade-offs" between environmental protection and economic development is a good starting point. It is as unrealistic for environmentalists to promote the "lock it up" approach as it is for farmers to expect a land development free-for-all. Any decision making process needs to be clear, transparent and underpinned by good science.

A One Stop Shop

A key concern of the NTHA is the coordination of land management (or currently the lack of coordination). Planning productive and environmentally healthy regions will depend on taking an integrated approach, starting with a 'Whole of Government – one stop shop'. The current situation of parallel and overlaying processes have only complicated the land management agenda and made the outcome of sustainable development more difficult and more unlikely. The attempt to administratively separate development and conservation, land and water, clearing and vegetation, undermines the broad consideration of issues. This in turn results in poor decision making. What is required is an overarching land management policy which effectively draws together the various components of land management under a single umbrella. This policy would support processes which allowed for the practical consideration of issues on a regional basis within a broader context.

A Council of Northern Australia

Guiding this integrated approach a structure similar to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has been proposed. Comprising significant stakeholders, including the relevant government departments from Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland and appropriate non-government representatives, the Council of Northern Australia would oversee sustainable development and natural resource management in the region. Importantly this Council would need to ensure a simplified and more streamlined approach to sustainable development, rather than representing an additional layer of bureaucracy. The first step would be consideration of the presently fragmented arrangements for natural resource management with the aim of developing simplified and more integrated systems. Until this is achieved the single biggest threat to good land management will continue to be imperfect land management systems.

The Big Picture

Future challenges will require us to consider carefully our use of natural resources and the evidence suggests strongly that broad and early planning is essential. Current complicated land and resource management systems are not the model for effective environmental protection. For sustainability outcomes to be understood and implemented on the ground the path must be clear and accommodating. The current model also encourages planning from the micro scale up, rather than from the macro scale down. Instead of identifying areas of significance and planning their protection, or identifying areas appropriate for development and planning their use, we consider each resource, each activity and each block of land in isolation. If we are looking to manage our natural resources then we need to consider the whole environment, as well as social and economic drivers.

Conclusion

As one of the largest water users the horticultural industry is a significant stakeholder in the water debate and although research is being undertaken to make irrigation systems more efficient demand for water will certainly grow. The sustainable use of water and other natural resources needs to be supported in areas identified as being suitable for agriculture. If the desired outcome is effective land management then an integrated planning system is an essential starting point. The current complexity makes the planning regime so onerous as to put off even enthusiastic participants. Addressing this issue is absolutely essential to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved. The NTHA strongly maintains that sustainable horticultural development is both achievable and the best possible outcome for all stakeholders and we look forward to participating in a truly integrated approach to natural resource management in Northern Australia.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback from the perspective of the horticultural community.

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