



# Media Release

29 June 2009

## **BIG JOB FOR NORTHERN AUSTRALIA LAND AND WATER TASKFORCE**

With a massive 300 million hectares sitting above the Tropic of Capricorn, the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce have a lot of ground (and water) to cover.

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has set the Taskforce the job of reporting to him by the end of the year on the sustainable development of Australia's northern water resources that is: how water across the north can be used sustainably for development; for communities and culture; and for the environment.

Chairperson of the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce, Joe Ross, said that for a Government focused on nation building and a massive infrastructure investment program, the emphasis on sustainable development may seem a little off message.

"To his credit the Prime Minister has challenged this Taskforce to look at the long-term and to report on how we should go about developing the north so that its full contribution to, and its share in national prosperity, is realised. There is also the very strong undertone that we must not repeat the mistakes made in the south over the past 100 year," Mr Ross said.

The Taskforce was originally set up in 2007. The original Taskforce focussed on identifying new development opportunities across the north, but in particular on opportunities in agriculture.

The change of government in November 2007 led to a considered change to the membership and as a first step several new members were appointed as well as Mr Joe Ross as the new Chairperson.

Mr Ross is a prominent Indigenous leader from Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia and one of the original Taskforce members. He was appointed as the Chair in September 2008. This is a significant appointment for it clearly demonstrates the Government's confidence in our Indigenous leaders to shape the future for citizens in northern Australia.

The terms of reference for the Taskforce were also broadened. No longer simply looking for new agricultural ventures, the Taskforce is now charged with considering Indigenous futures, the potential market for ecosystem

services, improved governance arrangements and the potential impacts of development, among other issues. This is no small ask in just twelve months.

To support the change of focus and reinforce the independence of the new Taskforce, additional experts were also added to the membership from the mining, irrigation, higher education and conservation sectors, as well as additional Indigenous leaders from across the north.

Asking the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce to provide the Prime Minister with a report by the end of this year demonstrates that the voice of northern Australia is integral to the future policy directions of the country. The Taskforce is also being closely supported by federal government organisations such as the Office of Northern Australia, the CSIRO and the National Water Commission and demonstrates the Government's commitment to a thorough job.

Mr Ross said the Taskforce was no longer focussed on just finding a site for an irrigation scheme or a dam, but rather what the long term sustainable development of water resources in northern Australia needs to look like.

"We're looking at productive outcomes for truly sustainable developments involving innovative practices in aquaculture, horticulture and the pastoral industries; new markets for eco-system services and carbon abatement; and a new deal for Indigenous communities that includes genuine engagement and sustainable businesses," Mr Ross said.

"These are not blanket solutions but need to be tailored to the regions in the north. Solutions that might have worked in the south will simply not work in the north.

"The Taskforce is aiming for a positive, holistic approach which will have a flow on effect to the people of the region for generations to come. Together we will create a lively debate and address the big issues of sustainable development."

Once the current economic conditions settle, Mr Ross anticipates that new employment growth will provide opportunities never experienced before in the north. He predicts recent investments in physical and social infrastructure for regional and remote communities, and progress in 'closing the gap' by providing new opportunities in education and training, employment, housing and quality health services will generate a step-change in fortunes.

"It will be like a whole new world opening up here in the north. But with all this must come careful, considered planning and that's what the Taskforce is tasked with.' Indeed a very large task," Mr Ross said.

"We are lucky that we have time to plan; getting it right is crucial."