

JANUARY 2015

Northern RDA Alliance Communique

Overview

The Northern RDA Alliance comprises eight RDAs whose regions make up Northern Australia. This network, representing the Gascoyne in Western Australia to Gladstone in Central Queensland, has been meeting to explore common interests and issues. Our aim is to support policies and to prioritise investment opportunities to ensure the sustainable development of Northern Australia.

After making a collective submission to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry concerning the future of Northern Australia, the Alliance met in Darwin in June 2014 to discuss the Developing Northern Australia Green Paper. The Alliance considered shared priorities for the implementation of the six broad Australian Government policy directions outlined in the Green Paper.

The Alliance is supportive of the Australian Government's efforts to focus policy and investment attention on Northern Australia and we recognise the need to make a convincing case for national investment. Hence we support the broad approach taken with respect to the six key policy directions. The Alliance is committed to the need for a clear strategy to unite the policy and investment objectives of the Australian, State and Territory governments, combined with a focus on lifting investment barriers for private capital.

The Northern RDA Alliance can greatly assist the Government's policy on Northern Australia. Our concern is to explore the key ground-breaking reforms and investments needed to secure our future through implementation of ideas outlined in the Green Paper into a policy and investment-oriented White Paper.



An Australian Government Initiative

Regional Development Australia (RDA) is an Australian Government initiative that brings together all levels of government to enhance the development of Australia's regions.

RDAs are local people developing local solutions to local issues.

The Northern RDA Alliance priorities include:

A Genuine Exploration of Incentive Options to Lift Northern Australian Investment and Liveability

The Green Paper outlines possible policy initiatives that could genuinely foster and increase investment in priority infrastructure, enterprise and migration into Northern Australia (e.g. special economic zones, tax arrangements, asset depreciation). We understand that any such incentives need to be demonstrated to be in the National interest and avoid serious distortions in the Australian economy that might cause problems in the future. As such, a clear terms of reference should be developed and progressed through the Productivity Commission to ensure a transparent process, extensive identification of options and analysis of costs/benefits.

Connecting Northern Australia through Strategic Road Infrastructure

The White Paper presents a nation building opportunity to enhance real connectivity across and to Northern Australia through strategic investment. This will deliver better supply chains and bring improved social benefits to Northern Australian communities. Such a catalytic investment needs to be focussed on the growth of major Northern Australian centres, towns and industries and increase east-west and north-south connectivity. Investments must be based on effective supply chain analysis and emerging National, State and Territory road infrastructure priorities (15 year infrastructure plans).



Integrated ICT including Trialling High-Speed Wireless Technology

Effective ICT, including phone and internet, underscores Northern Australia's ability to function across enormous distances and climatic extremes. There are still many communities in Northern Australia that lack basic services such as fixed-line telecommunications to each residence and access to 3G and 4G mobile networks. New NBN satellite technology (available in 2016) and substantive progress in removing mobile black spots will contribute directly to the development of Northern Australia; particularly with increases to e-services in health and education, reducing travel demands and increasing market access.

However, regional and remote areas will benefit from complementary high-speed wireless networks that will enhance all ICT functions, including health, land management, disaster management and agricultural productivity improvements. A full evaluation of alternative technology and its feasibility, affordability and benefits, and subsequent trial of the most promising commercial technology and integrated networks offers an opportunity to turbo-charge future advances. High-speed wireless networks, if proven affordable and reliable, will increase economic development and encourage private investment.

Secure Access to Clean Water for Northern Australian Communities

The fundamentals of secure access to potable water are still far from being achieved in Northern Australian communities. This includes many small rural and remote communities and some emerging regional centres. As secure and safe access to potable water is a basic right we need to have a dedicated, coordinated and explicit Australian, State, and Territory government program to address this issue. Such a program could identify key potable water security and quality risks and targets, identify the most appropriate and sustainable solutions, and leverage delivery strategies, including appropriate approaches to long term asset management. Such a program would also identify efficient and appropriate water storage options to support communities and industry development. This commitment needs to be bilateral with clear national targets and an agreed delivery framework to secure the water needs of all Northern Australians.

Towards a collaborative research initiative supporting agriculture

The Northern RDA Alliance considers the challenge of improving productivity and reducing the operating costs of agriculture in Northern Australia as critical to building regional communities and diversifying our economies. Specialist agriculture also presents one of our greatest commodity and knowledge exports to our populous northern neighbours. The Alliance understands that strong signals have been given for the establishment and potential widening of the emerging Ag North CRC concept, with a focus on lifting the barriers to investment. This also presents an opportunity to build the capacity of all key R&D institutions from the Gascoyne to Gladstone. The continued development of, and investment in, a strong CRC- like proposal with a focus on agriculture is strongly supported.



Towards a Northern Australian Energy Strategy

Northern Australia is at a cross roads in terms of its long term energy security and affordability; both in off-grid and fringe off-grid areas. Rapidly increasing energy costs, changing energy policies and a non-strategic approach to the long term energy needs of Northern Australia are real threats to our continued economic survival, let alone continued growth. Northern Australia needs a cohesive and innovative policy direction that takes advantage of energy development opportunities; one that is agreed bilaterally and across all levels of government. The Northern RDA Alliance is calling for an 18 month focus on this key issue, a cross-government and cross-regional collaboration to develop a clear Northern Australian Energy Strategy. The Strategy will achieve energy security

and affordability, generate options for addressing remote, fringe off-grid and 'on grid' energy security issues, and build upon our energy commodity and knowledge exports.

The RDAs offer an established framework for stakeholder engagement and the Alliance members will be willing partners with any emerging CRC-like initiative on significant policy and regional initiatives.

It is hoped that these six Northern RDA Alliance priorities will assist in the process of framing a clear policy and investment focus in the transition from Green Paper to White Paper.

The Northern Australian RDAs will continue to work together, and with the Australian, State and Northern Territory governments, to see these priorities progressed.

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