


## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Finally, scientific-based evidence for Northern Australia food bowl

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By **SUE NEALES**, ANALYSIS

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Northern Australia has been known as the “Plains of Promise” since British naval officer John Lort Stokes set foot in 1841 on the Gulf Country mudflats near Burketown and “saw” grassy pastures dotted with English villages and sheep.

Ten years later, Melbourne property developers spruiked 310-acre lots for sale on the nearby Albert River for £80, despite the land being both largely unseen and not theirs to sell.

It was the first of many half-baked proposals to transform wild Northern Australia mooted over the next 150 years; ideas put forward by dreamers, schemers and bold pioneers based on grandiose visions rather than solid fact.

Recall the 1955 irrigation scheme known as the Humpty Doo Rice Project to grow 300,000ha of rice southeast of Darwin. Native magpie geese devouring fresh rice shoots put an end to that plan. Ditto the grand dream of growing cotton on the \$1.5 billion Ord River irrigation scheme in the East Kimberley, abandoned after 17 chemical sprays a year were needed to control insect pests, making the crop unviable.

Rice grown in the Ord, often called an irrigation scheme in search of a crop, was planted at the wrong time of the year, early sugar crops failed because of saline soils, while later plans of wall-to-wall sugar by Chinese investors failed because of a lack of enough suitable cropping land to justify building a \$400 million sugar mill.

More recent proposals for dams to irrigate big farms on many of the north's major rivers failed both business case studies and on environmental and native title grounds.

This is why the CSIRO's latest in-depth study of the potential of three of the north's most important and biggest river catchments is so welcome.

It fills a void too often inhabited by dreamers. Water availability is quantified, soil suitability tested, suggested crops rigorously screened.

That the CSIRO is providing key data and background to future northern development is not surprising. It was the voice of reason seven years ago when grand northern development plans once again stirred under Rudd and Abbott governments.

The Ord is losing its white elephant tag as its area expands, supporting Kununurra growers with expertise in crops such as sorghum, sandalwood and mangoes, and cotton.

But the missing link in northern development remains infrastructure. Until enough high value agricultural crops are grown, essential processing plants cannot be justified.

That is where the \$5bn Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund, and perhaps the Future Fund, must begin to play a partnership role if northern development is to become more than a dream.

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**Patrick**

1 HOUR AGO

Technology has moved on since then Sue. Genetically modified cotton is easily managed against insects with few sprays.

The Greens might hate the term "genetically modified" but in this case it leads to far superior environmental outcomes

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