

Northern Australia white paper ambitions stifled by red tape and lacking infrastructure - ABC News



Image Red tape and a lack of infrastructure are among some of the barriers to developing the north.(ABC News: Kristy O'Brien)

It was touted as the key to transforming the north into an "economic powerhouse" in its own right.

Key points:

- Development in northern Australia stifled by land access, policy uncertainty and a lack of capital investment
- Producers urge Federal Government to cut red tape to boost investment
- Government eager to work collaboratively with states, federal Agriculture Minister says

The Northern Australia white paper, released in 2015, set out a slew of ambitious policy ideas for the next 20 years: [new roads, studies of dam sites and changes to land-use laws, all designed to spark investment in the nation's top end and strengthen links with the broader Asia-Pacific region.](#)

But three years since the release of the wide-ranging agricultural blueprint, some fear it is a case of more talk than action.

[Persistent red tape, policy uncertainty over live exports and land access, foreign ownership and a lack of capital investment to develop infrastructure](#) remain a thorn in the side of progress.

And while the nation's northern dreams are in the pipeline, the trickle down can be slow.

At Beetaloo Station, south of Darwin, the Armstrong family is doing its best to buck the trend.

Beef is the biggest agricultural money spinner in the north, generating \$800 million every year, and with the nation's top end tipped as the future food bowl for Asia's growing middle class, it's a motivating force to increase their capacity to pump out food.



Image Beetaloo Station has increased its carrying capacity of cattle from 20,000 head to 80,000.(*ABC News: Kristy O'Brien*)

By using their 2.6 million acres of land more efficiently, they've made one of the biggest water investments in northern Australia.

It cost \$40 million to lay 3,000 kilometres of pipe and construct 600 waterpoints — but it has meant they can increase their cattle numbers dramatically.

"Even though it's not rocket science, we put water on country, it hasn't been done," said Jane Armstrong, owner of Beetaloo Station.

People 'giving up' on development

Beetaloo is now regarded as one of the best stations in the north, and their infrastructure investment has seen their carrying capacity of cattle increase from 20,000 head to 80,000 head in just under 8 years.

The Armstrongs have invested in capturing the one thing farmers can rely on in the north — and that's rain. The wet season comes without fail, and when it does, there is no shortage of water.

But for the other six months of the year, the rivers turn into a trickle. With a 90 per cent evaporation rate, the water must be stored or it is useless.

The Federal Government has made no secret of the fact it is eager to open the flood gates on dams in a bid to drought-proof properties and build probability into agriculture.

But there are barriers stopping such progress.



Image Jane Armstrong (R) has invested in water infrastructure to increase Beetaloo Station's cattle numbers.(ABC News: Kristy O'Brien)

"Vegetation management laws, tree clearing guidelines, water access plans, getting access to water licences, getting access to extraction licences, all these things; native title encumbrances restrict even the Aboriginal people's right to develop their own land," said former agriculture minister Barnaby Joyce.

"People just give up, whether they are Aboriginal groups or farming groups or development groups.

"They'll say obviously the government has no interest in this but to support ... a pod of bureaucrats who are becoming very wealthy by sending reports

back and forth, the purpose of which is ultimately to make sure nothing happens."

Agriculture and Water Minister David Littleproud said resources were owned by the states, and it was critical they worked together through the approvals process.

"We've shown our commitment to build water infrastructure by saying here's a cheque, we're ready to cut it if you go and get the excavators ready to go," he said.

"We ask the states to work with us collaboratively to get that approval. We can tick the environmental boxes and we can still build dams.

"We can still grow agriculture in this country if we're smart ... It's about getting the balance right."