

## Formal response to the Northern Australia Economic Reform Roundtable

### Advance Cairns – Far North Queensland’s economic and advocacy body.

#### Innovation and R&D

- Government needs to:
  - Send a consistent signal to industry and potential investors
  - Streamline approvals with concurrent rather than consecutive processes
- The tyranny of isolation sees rural and remote Australia demonstrate resilience and ingenuity to solve problems not faced by metropolitan centres. However, access to capital and educational opportunities mean this potential remains untapped. At the same time, regions across Northern Australia face economic, social and educational disadvantage which can deepen existing inequities.  
*Important:* the capacity of business in rural and remote Australia to introduce innovations and improve productivity is constrained by lack of suppliers and scale (not by lack of ingenuity and capacity to reimagine new ways of doing things which the region has in abundance).
- Productivity and equity remain intrinsically linked, with a large grossly under-employed workforce of First Nations people. Empowering communities through material place-based economic development programs will unlock a large workforce, go some way to addressing this inequity and build a more productive and resilient future.  
*(see impacts of poor digital connectivity in section 2).*
- Unlock the critical minerals, and new and emerging sectors in the biofuels sector: Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) produced from sugar cane feedstock offers an opportunity to enhance critical fuel supply, sovereign capability, reduce carbon emissions and meet global demand. Clear policy settings are required to give the industry, and investors, certainty and to kick-start the potential of SAF to decarbonise heavy industry and the marine fleet.
- New models of education such as James Cook University’s submission to the Productivity Commission for Learning Integrated Work should be considered. Greater harmonisation across sectors would also unlock education and integrated work-based opportunities (with a focus on industry co-designed micro-credential short courses) while achieving scale in rural and remote Australia and addressing workforce shortages.

- NAIF has the potential to underpin smaller scale projects that would otherwise not see funding opportunities in the regions. Streamlining processes and understanding scalability for remote, regional and rural communities could make the difference for economic survivability.

## Section 2:

Connectivity isn't only about infrastructure it directly impacts liveability, workforce attraction, and human capital development. Without it, the North will struggle to recruit and retain the skills it needs. The digital divide is especially urgent. Emerging productivity technologies—like AI and autonomous systems—depend on fast, reliable digital infrastructure. Yet many northern regions remain digitally underpowered. Without action, we risk leaving these communities further behind. Strategic investment in both physical and digital networks needs to be supported by education and training to support the bridging of the digital divide and increase productivity.

### **Connectivity improvements - Physical (transport/logistics) and digital connectivity**

Economic *survivability* rather than economic *sustainability* risks the future of rural and remote communities.

- Deliver digital connectivity to all Australians, regardless of where they live to ensure equal access to opportunity. Lack of digital connectivity outside major regional centres entrenches disadvantage which not only widens the education gap but also the health gap – continues to grow as innovation delivers health services via telehealth, a mode which is currently unavailable to most communities living across Northern Australia. Poor health outcomes inhibit productivity and are a drag on the economy, in addition to the significant social cost.
- Providing digital access to all Australians regardless of where they live will also improve educational outcomes for students outside major centres and significantly boost productivity and foster a “grow your own” skilled workforce.
- As the rapid take-up of AI technology grows, generating greater demand for energy, the need to address the digital connectivity gap becomes even more important to ensure regional and remote Australia remains productive and competitive.

#### **Roads/transport:**

- Activate the Northern Australian Ministerial Forum to have oversight and fast-track agreed national road/transport links.
- Ensure Defence better engages with local communities and across Departments (particularly Infrastructure and Northern Australia) ahead of resource deployment to ensure alignment and optimum application of investment.
- Unlock regional high value add food produce exports markets by breaking freight forwarders' control of transport distribution.



- Apply fit-for-purpose business models to key regional transport links which amplify overall national productivity gains rather than population usage (for example in the protein-producing sectors).

### **Skills attraction and Human Capital**

- Unlock human capital in rural and remote areas by improving digital connectivity thereby increasing access to learning opportunities and making education accessible to all Australians.
- Unlock human capital by creating material place-based economic development opportunities for indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people (one example, work with local communities to equip and skill them to utilise allocated but unused water resources)
- Ensure that road/transport/air services connectivity considers the critical social impact of inadequate road networks and annual closures, cost prohibitive regional air services. This goes to the heart of dispersing populations, boosting liveability in regional areas and workforce growth in areas of scarcity.
- Develop a national population strategy.
- Incentivise population moves to regional and remote areas to boost workforce through tax and other arrangements. This would enhance livability, boost regional population centres and bring much-needed skills to rural and remote Australia.
- Use dedicated immigration levers through target visa programs to fill workforce gaps (both skilled and semi-skilled) in rural and remote Australia (potential expanding DAMA and PALM). These sectors include construction, industrial/chemists/engineers and skills required for the energy transition. Mandate minimum extended stay in regional locations.
- Streamline and identify anomalies and unintended consequences in the existing immigration visa program which prevent the nation from attracting highly sought-after professionals in sectors which need these skills\*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. A highly skilled aviation engineer can get visas to work in Australia, however that same engineer is not permitted to teach, thus exacerbating the industry shortage and lack of pipeline of emerging aviation engineers.

