



Build Them Now

Publish Date:

August 2012

This article from the [August 2012 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is by Researcher for the North Australia Project at the IPA, Fiona Tracey.

Dams have been off the policy agenda in Australia for at least the last two decades. In fear of a backlash from green groups, governments at state and federal levels have avoided the topic, refused even to consider dams as an option and generally knocked back proposals to build new ones.

Indeed, creating this policy environment has been one of the most successful achievements of the green movement.

This blanket opposition to dams, however, is narrow minded and unsustainable.

Fortunately, there has been a shift in the debate recently which will hopefully result in the 'No More Dams' mantra being discarded forever.



We commonly think of dams in the context of their role in our capital cities. We monitor assiduously their storage levels on which our water supply depends. We realise their importance and yet it is discounted when it comes to policy development.

Brisbane's Wivenhoe Dam was in the spotlight after the floods in southeast Queensland last year, for its role in preventing even more disastrous floods.

But storing our drinking water and helping to mitigate floods are only two of the many benefits of dams.

In Northern Australia, creation of more dams will, quite literally, revolutionise the economy.

New dams and water storages will allow for a significant expansion of the agricultural industry in Northern Australia, which is a long way from fulfilling its potential.

Fifty per cent of Australia's total annual rainfall falls in Northern Australia. Moreover, although most irrigated agriculture in Australia occurs around the Murray-Darling Basin in southern Australia, regions in Northern Australia record almost twice the average annual rainfall of the Murray-Darling Basin.

About 65 per cent, or 152,500 gigalitres, of the country's water runoff occurs in far north Australia and coastal Queensland. Australia's total agricultural water use in 2010/11 was 7,551 gigalitres.

If harnessed and stored effectively, this rainfall could be put to productive use.

An increasing global population means that the underdeveloped North of Australia holds an opportunity for the development of a food bowl that could feed the Australian population, and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Australia has remained a net food exporter for well over a century, producing enough food to feed 60 million people. With greater agricultural development, this number could double to 120 million people. Moreover, our agricultural technology helps feed 400 million.

A 2010 study by members of the International Union of Soil Scientists (IUSS) found that up to 17 million hectares of land in Northern Australia is arable. This includes areas in the Fitzroy region of Western Australia, the Daly River Basin in the Northern Territory and Queensland's Cape York.

In addition, the CSIRO's Northern Australia Land and Water Science Review found that between 5 and 17 million hectares of the area assessed was potentially suitable for agriculture on account of its arable soil.

The CSIRO has concluded that crop production in Northern Australia is limited by water availability, not soil. Developing these areas could add significantly to the 40-50 million hectares already used for agriculture in southern states.



In order to reap the benefits in these areas of Northern Australia, policies should be put in place that enable commercial enterprise to develop agricultural infrastructure especially dams-to turn the region into a food bowl to feed the world's growing population.

These policies should include measures to reduce regulatory hurdles that delay the building of dams and other agricultural infrastructure, and in many cases prevent their commercial viability.

One only needs to look at the Ord River scheme in the Kimberley region of Western Australia to see the ways in which the establishment of dams can support widespread local agricultural activity.

In addition to these larger dams and schemes, farmers and cattlemen in the region have expressed their interest in constructing private water storages on their own properties.

Too often the negatives are focused on, when in fact the development of irrigation in Northern Australia also has great advantages. Rainfall in the North is often far more reliable than in other parts of Australia and the efficient collection and storage of this water would ensure more certain supply.

The CSIRO estimates that over the next 50 years, Australia will need to find new water supplies of more than 1000GL to meet demand. Dams must be part of any future water supply and management plan.

Advocating for the establishment of dams should not be regarded as controversial. It is just common sense. Australia has highly variable rainfall and the use of dams moderates the impacts of this cycle.

The blanket opposition to dams from green lobby groups does not reflect mainstream views and has come at the expense of good public policy.