**Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment**

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| Agricultural resource assessment for the Gilbert catchment  A report to the Australian Government from the CSIRO Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment, part of the North Queensland Irrigated Agriculture Strategy  Editors: Cuan Petheram, Ian Watson and Peter Stone  December 2013 |

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Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment acknowledgments

This report was prepared for the Office of Northern Australia in the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development under the North Queensland Irrigated Agriculture Strategy <<http://www.regional.gov.au/regional/ona/nqis.aspx>>. The Strategy is a collaborative initiative between the Office of Northern Australia, the Queensland Government and CSIRO. One part of the Strategy is the Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment, which was led by CSIRO. Important aspects of the Assessment were undertaken by the Queensland Government and TropWATER (James Cook University).

The Strategy was guided by two committees:

(i) the **Program Governance Committee**, which included the individuals David Crombie (GRM International), Scott Spencer (SunWater, during the first part of the Strategy) and Paul Woodhouse (Regional Development Australia) as well as representatives from the following organisations: Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development; CSIRO; and the Queensland Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

(ii) the **Program Steering Committee**, which included the individual Jack Lake (Independent Expert) as well as representatives from the following organisations: Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development; CSIRO; the Etheridge, Flinders and McKinlay shire councils; Gulf Savannah Development; Mount Isa to Townsville Economic Development Zone; and the Queensland Government.

Chapters 1 to 7 of this report were reviewed by Dr Graham Bonnett (CSIRO Plant Industry) and Dr Glen Walker (CSIRO Land and Water). Dr Brian Keating (Sustainable Agriculture Flagship) and Dr Peter Wallbrink (Water for a Healthy Country Flagship) reviewed the entire report. The following people reviewed all or part of one or more case studies (chapters 8 to 10): Dr Andrew Ash (CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences) and Dr Brad Pusey (River Research Pty Ltd).

For further acknowledgements, see page vi.

Director’s foreword

Northern Australia comprises approximately 20% of Australia’s land mass but remains relatively undeveloped. It contributes about 2% to the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP) and accommodates around 1% of the total Australian population.

Recent focus on the shortage of water and on climate-based threats to food and fibre production in the nation’s south have re-directed attention towards the possible use of northern water resources and the development of the agricultural potential in northern Australia. Broad analyses of northern Australia as a whole have indicated that it is capable of supporting significant additional agricultural and pastoral production, based on more intensive use of its land and water resources.

The same analyses also identified that land and water resources across northern Australia were already being used to support a wide range of highly valued cultural, environmental and economic activities. As a consequence, pursuit of new agricultural development opportunities would inevitably affect existing uses and users of land and water resources.

The Flinders and Gilbert catchments in north Queensland have been identified as potential areas for further agricultural development. The Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment (the Assessment), of which this report is a part, provides a comprehensive and integrated evaluation of the feasibility, economic viability and sustainability of agricultural development in these two catchments as part of the North Queensland Irrigated Agricultural Strategy. The Assessment seeks to:

* identify and evaluate water capture and storage options
* identify and test the commercial viability of irrigated agricultural opportunities
* assess potential environmental, social and economic impacts and risks.

By this means it seeks to support deliberation and decisions concerning sustainable regional development.

The Assessment differs from previous assessments of agricultural development or resources in two main ways:

* It has sought to ‘join the dots’. Where previous assessments have focused on single development activities or assets – without analysing the interactions between them – ­this Assessment considers the opportunities presented by the simultaneous pursuit of multiple development activities and assets. By this means, the Assessment uses a whole-of-region (rather than an asset-by-asset) approach to consider development.
* The novel methods developed for the Assessment provide a blueprint for rapidly assessing future land and water developments in northern Australia.

Importantly, the Assessment has been designed to lower the barriers to investment in regional development by:

* explicitly addressing local needs and aspirations
* meeting the needs of governments as they regulate the sustainable and equitable management of public resources with due consideration of environmental and cultural issues
* meeting the due diligence requirements of private investors, by addressing questions of profitability and income reliability at a broad scale.

Most importantly, the Assessment does not recommend one development over another. It provides the reader with a range of possibilities and the information to interpret them, consistent with the reader’s values and their aspirations for themselves and the region.

Signature of Dr Peter Stone

Dr Peter Stone, Deputy Director, CSIRO Sustainable Agriculture Flagship

Key findings

North Queensland’s Gilbert catchment, comprising an area of approximately 46,000 km2, drains into the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. Its population of approximately 1200 people is engaged mainly in pastoralism, but tourism, mining and commercial fishing make important contributions to the economy. Dryland and irrigated cropping currently occupy less than 0.02% of the landscape.

This report on the Gilbert catchment seeks to:

* identify and evaluate water capture and storage options
* identify and test the commercial viability of irrigated agricultural opportunities
* assess potential environmental, social and economic impacts and risks.

The Assessment acknowledges that locals have insights, skills and aspirations to contribute to development plans for the benefit of their region, community and environment. Scientific knowledge of the type produced by this Assessment should complement rather than compete with local knowledge.

#### Water capture and storage options

Two prospective instream water storages (dams) of significant scale have been identified (Green Hills and Dagworth dams). When combined, these two dams are capable of delivering to crops approximately 250 gigalitres (GL) of water in 85% of years. The next four most prospective instream dams add relatively small volumes of water at relatively high cost.

There is more soil suited to irrigation in the Gilbert catchment than there is water to irrigate it. If the most prospective six instream storages were to exist, it would be possible to irrigate approximately 0.6% of the catchment’s irrigable soils.

On-farm dams are considered less prospective because of the catchment’s often sandy soils, though there are locations suited to on-farm water storage.

#### Agricultural opportunities

Based on the identified water storage and the large areas of potentially irrigable agricultural soils (approximately 2 million ha), there is the potential for an irrigation development of 20,000 to 30,000 ha supporting year-round mixed irrigated and dryland cropping. The precise area under irrigation will, in any year, vary depending on factors such as irrigation efficiency, water availability, crop choice and risk appetite. A development of this scale is larger than the existing Ord River Irrigation Area, and may be sufficient to sustain local processing facilities such as a cotton gin or a sugarcane mill. If crops were grown to their full potential, the regional gross margin of crop production could exceed $60 million/year.

Dryland production is sensitive to the very high year‑to‑year variability of rainfall in the Gilbert catchment. Break-even yields of most crops can be achieved only two to three years in ten, which precludes commercial returns on development costs such as land clearing. If these costs are ‘sunk’, commercial returns from dryland cropping require that crops approach their full yield potential and that they are grown only in years when cropping opportunity is high. This can be clearly distinguished at sowing time using seasonal rainfall outlooks and information about water stored in dams and in soil. Despite these challenges, dryland cropping is likely to be a component of irrigation development.

#### Environmental impacts and risks

Irrigated agricultural development has a wide range of potential benefits and risks.

The two most prospective dams would, in the downstream environment, amplify the environmental and other challenges associated with dry years. Critical environmental processes (such as wetland inundation) would not be greatly affected by water extraction in ‘average’ or wet years, largely because the dams would be located in the middle reaches of the catchment and would intercept a mean 14% and median 20% of flow to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Impacts of reduced river discharges to the Gulf on commercial and recreational fishing catches are possible but have not been quantified in this study. Large-scale change of land and water use is likely to require a wide range of regulatory, social and cultural responses, including consideration of native title implications.

Under the development scenarios examined, the high capital costs of dams and water delivery infrastructure (approximately $1 billion) precludes economic returns on combined investment in water assets and irrigated farming. Where third-party investment in water storage and delivery was examined, it was found that commercial returns on irrigated agriculture are possible when crops approached their full yield potential – a condition that becomes more probable with experience.

#### Key deliverables

This report is one of two catchment reports within a suite of products provided by the Assessment to fulfil its contractual obligations:

* Technical reports present scientific work at a level of detail sufficient for technical and scientific experts to reproduce the work.
* Each of the two catchment reports (i.e. this report and another for the Flinders catchment) synthesises key material from the technical reports, providing well-informed but non-scientific readers with the information required to make decisions about the opportunities, costs and benefits associated with irrigated agriculture.
* Two overview reports – one for each catchment – are provided for a general public audience.
* A factsheet provides key findings for both the Flinders and Gilbert catchments for a general public audience.

All these products are listed in full in Appendix A.

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Each of the accompanying technical reports (see Appendix A) contains its own set of acknowledgements. Here we acknowledge those people who went ‘above and beyond’ and who contributed across the Assessment activities.

The communities of the Flinders and Gilbert catchments enthusiastically embraced the Assessment team. They provided: (i) hospitality, (ii) historical and contextual information, (iii) access to land and help in finding waterholes, bores, promising dam sites and other features, (iv) unpublished reports, and (v) answers to a bewildering array of questions from the Assessment team. Importantly, they also gave us ‘the time of day’, showing us around the catchment and their landholdings and providing the local context that is so important for work of this kind. In particular, we thank the members of FRAP, the Flinders River Agricultural Precinct. Brendan McNamara as Chair was welcoming from the beginning. Corbett Tritton, Chair of the Flinders River Agricultural Precinct Growers Group and a local grazier and irrigator was generous with his time, expertise and insights into agricultural development as well as providing access to his crops for the Assessment team to collect data. Ninian Stewart-Moore, Brian Hughes, Ardie Lord, Darren Beeton, Alistair McClymont, Edward McIntosh, Scott Harris, Campbell Keough, David and Kenneth Coleman, Colin Blacklock, Ray Theme, Jacqueline and Robert Curley as well as many other landholders helped the Assessment team. Brad Bowen and Ken and Brendan Fry took us through their existing irrigated enterprises. Grant Randell contributed both his expertise and his land and water to help us understand the opportunities for a range of crops. Landholders also contributed their time to formal surveys of their attitudes to agricultural development in the two catchments. Julie Harrison, the FRAP Project Officer, provided an enormous amount of assistance to the Assessment team. If Julie didn’t know the answer to a question, she put us in touch with someone who did. She helped organise our contacts with the local community and, importantly, Julie was such an enthusiastic supporter and advocate of the Assessment team that she provided the credibility that we needed for others to contribute their thoughts, expertise and information.

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The North Queensland Irrigated Agriculture Strategy’s steering committee and governance committee provided us with wise counsel, good advice and the confidence that the Assessment was progressing well. The Stakeholder Engagement and Communication Strategy working group, especially Bec Jennings and Vern Rudwick, was instrumental in ensuring cross-agency co-ordination and provided communication products to stakeholders.

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Finally, the complexity and scale of this Assessment meant that we spent more time away from our families than we might otherwise have chosen. The whole team recognises this can only happen with the love and support of our families, so thank you.

Contents

[Director’s foreword i](#_Toc378947607)

[Key findings ii](#_Toc378947608)

[The Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment team iv](#_Toc378947609)

[Acknowledgements vi](#_Toc378947610)

[Contents viii](#_Toc378947611)

[Part I Introduction 1](#_Toc378947612)

1 Preamble 2

1.1 Context: development in northern Australia 2

1.2 Flinders and Gilbert Agricultural Resource Assessment 4

1.3 Report objectives and structure 6

1.4 References 8

2 Key concepts and Assessment methods 10

2.1 Key concepts 10

2.2 Assessment methods 12

2.3 References 29

Part II Information for assessing potential scheme-scale and farm-scale irrigation developments 33

3 Physical environment of the Gilbert catchment 34

3.1 Summary 35

3.2 Geology 36

3.3 Soils of the Gilbert catchment 37

3.4 Climate 47

3.5 Hydrology 56

3.6 References 77

4 Living and built environment of the Gilbert catchment 80

4.1 Summary 81

4.2 Ecology of the Gilbert catchment 82

4.3 Indigenous pre-history and colonial history of the Gilbert catchment 93

4.4 Indigenous water values, rights and interests and Indigenous development aspirations 101

4.5 Broader social environmental values 108

4.6 Catchment profile 108

4.7 References 121

5 Opportunities for irrigation in the Gilbert catchment 128

5.1 Summary 129

5.2 Water storage opportunities 130

5.3 Water distribution systems – conveyance of water from storage to the crop 162

5.4 Land development for irrigation 171

5.5 Cropping and other agricultural opportunities 172

5.6 Summary of dam and scheme-scale costs 220

5.7 References 221

6 Overview of economic opportunities and constraints 226

6.1 Summary 227

6.2 Farm-scale opportunities 228

6.3 Scheme-scale opportunities 238

6.4 Legislation and regulation 246

6.5 Regional-scale impacts 249

6.6 References 249

7 How can the sustainability of irrigated agriculture be maximised? 252

7.1 Summary 253

7.2 Risk of irrigation-induced salinisation 254

7.3 Managing irrigation drainage 262

7.4 Ecological implications of altered flow regimes 264

7.5 References 267

Part III Case studies 271

8 Green Hills dam and irrigated three-crop rotation 272

8.1 Summary 273

8.2 Storyline for this case study 274

8.3 Soils near Green Hills 277

8.4 Climate suitability for cotton, peanuts and sorghum (forage) at Green Hills 279

8.5 Scheme configuration and cropping systems 280

8.6 Financial analysis 287

8.7 On-site and off-site impacts 303

8.8 References 307

9 Dagworth and Green Hills dams and irrigated sugarcane 310

9.1 Summary 311

9.2 Storyline for this case study 312

9.3 Soils along the Gilbert and Einasleigh rivers 315

9.4 Climate suitability of sugarcane in the Georgetown area 319

9.5 Scheme configuration and cropping systems 320

9.6 Financial analysis 328

9.7 On-site and off-site impacts 341

9.8 References 346

10 Kidston Dam and irrigated Rhodes grass 348

10.1 Summary 349

10.2 Storyline for this case study 350

10.3 Soils near Einasleigh 352

10.4 Geophysics investigation 355

10.5 Climate suitability for irrigated forage crops near Einasleigh 357

10.6 Configuration of irrigation developments and cropping systems 358

10.7 Financial analysis 363

10.8 On-site and off-site impacts 373

10.9 References 377

Appendixes 379

Appendix A 380

Assessment products 380

Appendix B 383

Shortened forms 383

Geological timeline 385

Units 386

Data sources and availability 387

Glossary and terms 389

Appendix C 391

List of figures 391

Appendix D 400

List of tables 400

|  |
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|  |

Part I Introduction

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Chapters 1 and 2 provide background and context for the Assessment and outline the methods adopted to undertake the work:

* Chapter 1 covers the background and context of the Assessment.
* Chapter 2 provides a high-level outline of the methods used by the Assessment. This information is designed to assist in understanding the limitations to – and uncertainty associated with – the information provided by the Assessment.

Readers will find these chapters provide the context for and critical foundational information about the Assessment with key concepts introduced and explained.

For a synthesis of the key findings from the Assessment, see page ii.