

CUMMINGS ECONOMICS

38 Grafton St (PO Box 2148) CAIRNS Q 4870 ABN 99 734 489 175

Tel : 07 4031 2888 | Mobile : 0418 871 011

Email : cummings@cummings.net.au

Website : www.cummings.net.au



February 2022 / CE Ref-J3416

THE REGION'S FARMING ENTREPRENEURS

Article For Connect FNQ Magazine

In an Australian context, the Cairns 'Peninsula Australia' Geographic Region is outstanding in its biological resources – both terrestrial and marine. This natural endowment has provided the region with outstanding opportunities to develop its economy.

While much of the region's focus over the past fifty years has been on seizing the opportunities this has brought to develop a tourism sector with local entrepreneurship as well as outside private enterprise investment playing a leading role, quietly and largely unheralded in the background, the region's farming entrepreneurs have been kicking goals for the region's economy.

Mechanisation of Sugar

In the 1960s, farmers combined with local engineering works, finally developed commercially successful mechanical cane harvesters that with bulk handling, so effectively cut the costs of production such, that the sugar industry could throw off the need for protection and home market subsidisation, to fully enable it to compete on world markets. Not only did the industry survive but in fact expanded the area under production in this region to the Tablelands.

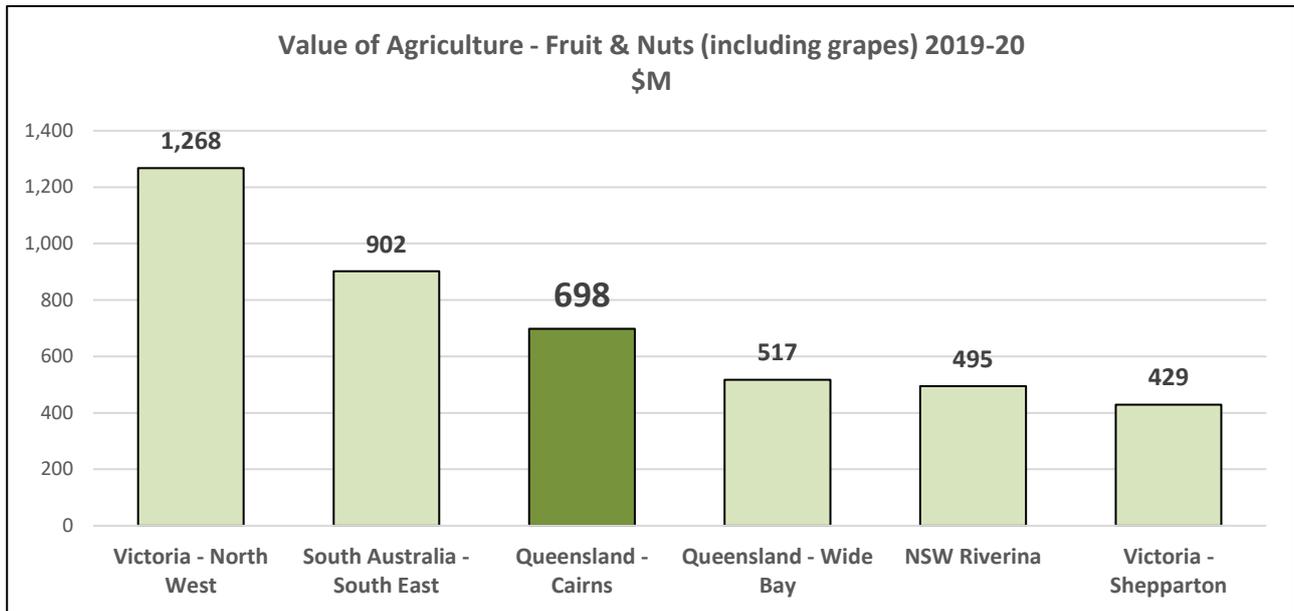
New Cattle Breeds

From the 1960s on, the region's cattlemen recognised the potential value of introducing into their herds the tropical origin Brahman beef cattle (that came to Australia via Texas). Northern Australia now has more cattle per square km than southern Australia. Cattle numbers and value of turnoff in this region have expanded strongly.

Developing a Horticultural Sector

From the 1970s, arrival of entrepreneurial banana growers in the Tully Valley from northern New South Wales and the efforts of people like the members of the Cairns Rare Fruits Society scouring the globe for new varieties, local farming entrepreneurs have built a major new horticultural sector that has taken the Cairns region to being one of the largest fruit growing regions in Australia (see table below).

The Third Largest Fruit Growing Region in Australia



The Cairns (SA4) region is now the third largest fruit producing region in Australia with only north-west Victoria (the Mildura Region) and South Australia's south-east region exceeding it, largely due to wine grape production. If the Dimbulah and Lakeland areas are added to the Cairns SA4 area, the value of fruit production at **\$820 million** is larger than that of the States of Western Australia (\$411m) and Tasmania (\$250m) and provides a major component of the region's total value of agricultural production recorded in 2019-20 of **\$1.9 billion**.

Another New Dimension on the Way

Today, the region's farming entrepreneurs are starting to build a whole new dimension to the region's agricultural earnings from the outside world.

Historically, for many decades, the region's crop production was confined to the region's higher rainfall areas of the tropical coast and the southern Tablelands.

The construction of Tinaroo Dam in the 1950s enabled agriculture to spread into the wet dry tropics in the Mareeba and Dimbulah areas, especially based on tobacco growing. When tariff protection was withdrawn from the tobacco industry in the 1990s, the Mareeba Dimbulah farming entrepreneurs stepped forward and developed one of the most diverse range of production of any farming area in Australia, especially in horticultural crops.

The sealing of the road north to Cooktown in the 1980s and 1990s, saw farming entrepreneurship expand the Mareeba Dimbulah horticultural production north to the rich volcanic soils of the Lakeland district and build smaller water storages to provide supplementary irrigation for these crops.

However, the region's wide savannah lands stretching out to the Gulf and up into the Peninsula remained given over to cattle grazing. The extensive broadacre cropping that characterises agriculture in the mid-west areas of southern Queensland and New South Wales did not develop in the North.

Broadacre Cropping into the Savannah Lands

The region's farming entrepreneurs are now starting to change that. They are extending broadacre cropping of cotton, sorghum and pulses (a type of cropping already established further south in southern and central Queensland), into the Savannah lands under natural rainfall and some with supplementary irrigation.

Substantial areas of cotton plantings have taken place around Dimbulah and west to Wrotham Park Station and around Mt Garnet and out to St Ronans Station in the Mt Surprise area. The largest plantings are taking place at Strathmore Station on the Gilbert River near Croydon.

There are also plans for substantial plantings of cotton south of Normanton on the Flinders River. Total plantings in 2020-21 are reported as being of the order of 17,000 ha.

With the nearest cotton gin for processing at Emerald in Central Queensland, the focus is now on establishing a cotton gin in the area – a step that will further encourage and consolidate the crop.

There is also strong global demand for pulses, especially in India and there are substantial areas being planted, especially of Mung Beans. There are proposals being looked at to establish export facilities.

The availability of substantial volumes of sorghum, also being planted, are potentially important for expansion of a range of livestock industries in the region. A by-product of cotton processing is cotton seed that will also make a valuable addition to availability of stockfeeds.

Potential for Further Expansion

Standing behind recent developments has been steady advances in farming practices suitable to the wet dry tropics, development of improved varieties for the area's climatic conditions, and importantly improved infrastructure, especially of sealed freight-efficient roads. These new developments are of immense potential importance to the region's future economic progress.

With the region accounting for 26% of Australia's water runoff, and large volumes of seasonal water available from the region's river systems, the region is well placed to expand well above its current 3% of value of Australia's agricultural production.