Thank you for the opportunity to facilitate discussion and summarise proceedings at today’s Forum.

In recent months I’ve had an opportunity to observe current thinking on northern agricultural development Australia-wide from a distance, through my consulting to the consortium running the proposal for the AgNorth Cooperative Research Centre. Combined with unprompted comments from my colleagues, it alerted me to the 50-year track record of project failures outnumbering successes in the North, and the reasons why.

So, in preparing for today I set for myself a simple structure for gleaning key messages from presentations and discussion.

What has changed?

In the knowledge shared by today’s investors, researchers and business leaders, what promises to improve the odds for success?

First, I note that among the speakers Graham Laitt (Milne AgriGroup P/L) came closest to addressing this question, by acknowledging past failures and describing a strategy with three significant elements:

- Focus on beef – an established industry with new market opportunities due to the rise of middle class consumers in Asia;
- Patience and realism in the timing of returns on investment; and
- Risk management through rigorous market assessment and application of business nous to reduce costs and practically deliver results.

More than that, across all speakers were indications that lessons had been learned and that the probability of success is greater:

1. There is a greater understanding of the risks: not just bio-physical and agronomic but economic and social risks; the importance of improving supply chain infrastructure; of sustained capital injection; and of land tenure reform (Terry Hill, Department of Agriculture and Food, WA).
2. There were examples of how risks could be managed through diversification: in the agribusiness sector – multiple enterprises in one group (Graham Laitt); in the farm sector – multiple crops in one farm business (Christian Bloecker, Bothkamp Australia Farm); from the resources sector – mining and agriculture sharing benefits (Jeff Wilkie, Rio Tinto); and in the government sector – dispersed projects in the Water for Food program (Vince Catania MLA, Parliamentary Secretary; Terry Hill).
3. There was ample evidence of sustained growth in demand for products from the North (Steve Meerwald, Agricultural Connections Australia P/L; Graham Laitt).
4. Capital is now better positioned with suppliers of choice (Vince Catania MLA).
5. There is now rigorous assessment of lower cost water supplies, suitable land in close proximity and recognition that while essential, this alone doesn’t make for sustainable development (Richard George, DAFWA).

6. New enterprises working with the established beef industry is more the norm than the exception, with catalysts for change in value chains (Jeff Wilkie; Steve Meerwald).

7. Public policy for development is more open, ranging across private capital and public-private collaboration on funding green field and supply chain developments (Terry Hill) and investing in R&D (Christian Bloecker), but with a frustration that clearing the way forward is not happening quickly enough (several speakers).

8. The importance of skills development, local management experience and supporting Indigenous enterprise was recognised (in discussion).

Clearly today’s forum was timely and highly informative, thanks to the initiative of the UWA Institute of Agriculture, the excellent contributions of speakers, and the energetic discussion. Thank you for the opportunity to participate.