



COTTON
AUSTRALIA



**Inquiry into preparing for emerging
industries across northern Australia
SUBMISSION**

30 January 2026

Inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across northern Australia Submission

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Contents

Inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across northern Australia Submission	2
Submission prepared by Simone Cameron.....	2
1. Executive summary	3
2. Recommendations	4
3. Conclusion	7
Bibliography	8



ABOUT COTTON AUSTRALIA

Cotton Australia is the peak body for Australia's cotton growers, representing up to 1,500 cotton farms in New South Wales, Queensland and most recently in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Cotton Australia works with growers and stakeholders to ensure the Australian cotton industry remains viable.

Cotton Australia supports the Australian cotton industry to be globally competitive, sustainable and valued by the community. It drives the industry's strategic direction, retains a strong focus on research and development, promotes strength of the industry, manages sustainability reporting and implements policy objectives.

1. Executive summary

Cotton Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper: **Inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across northern Australia**. Cotton Australia's vision is that in 2028, the Australian Cotton Industry will be thriving, trusted and in demand, with a strong reputation for reliability and quality. To achieve our purpose and satisfy this vision, we are focused on five key pillars: Advocacy, Leadership, Trust, Governance and Sustainability. The industry produces on average around 1 million tons of raw cotton fibre, worth over \$3.1 billion to the national economy (ABARES).

Northern Australia is large, comprising of 53% of Australia's land mass, however it is only home to 5.2% of the Australian population. This often leads to oversight of the many potential opportunities northern Australia can provide for the future prosperity of Australian industries both existing and emerging. These opportunities have been recognised for many decades¹ and continue to remain on national political agendas with slow progress and limited successful outcomes with many significant projects often facing a boom, bust cycle. 'Develop the North'¹ is a slogan many Australians are familiar with, yet the reality of this slogan today remains the polar opposite. Practical and logical solutions, coupled with financial commitment and support of government must be endorsed to enable the future potential of northern Australia. The cotton industry, which is emerging as a major growth area in northern Australia, since 2017, has the potential to have a significant contribution to emerging industries. The findings in the 2019 PwC Business Case² provide a strong foundation for prioritising NT's cotton industry, particularly in addressing infrastructure gaps, ensuring environmental safeguards, and promoting sustainable economic growth. Projections suggested that the NT cotton sector could generate *\$200–\$300 million annually*² in farm gate value, with additional downstream economic benefits through services, ginning, processing and export, facilitating critical economic growth.

Over the last decade there has been a significant interest in broadacre cropping in northern Australia, led by the well-established Australian Cotton Industry. Australian cotton is a major agricultural commodity with global markets and recognition. Since 2017 cotton has been commercially grown in the Northern Territory, the Ord Irrigation Area, Kununurra, WA and targeted pockets of Far North Queensland. This season across northern Australia, around 30,000ha has been planted.

This submission provided on behalf of the Australian cotton industry, focuses specifically on the industry's most recent developments in the northern areas of Australia and addresses the Joint Standing Committees on Northern Australia, Terms of Reference making recommendations where the Australian Cotton Industry has interaction, influence, and opportunities. Challenges faced as the industry continues to develop will be addressed within these recommendations.

² <https://ntfarmers.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/60321b63d7bd4778a95579680cac25f2.pdf>

³ [Cotton | Australian Cotton Markets](#)

⁴ [Primary Industries Research and Development Act 1989 - Federal Register of Legislation](#)

⁵ [Cotton Australia Sustainability | The Australian cotton industry...](#)

⁶ [Our Projects | SunCable](#)

2. Recommendations

a. The global transition to net zero and furthering renewable energy, decarbonization and carbon abatement

The Australian Cotton industry is a global leader with its progressive vision for constant improvement. They lead many other agricultural commodities through their globally recognised myBMP Stewardship Program and through the extensive annual contribution made toward research and development annually through the Federally supported Research Development Corporations (RDC's). Legislated under the *Primary Industries Research and Development Act 1989*⁴. The Australian cotton industry's objectives are to respectfully cooperate with government to contribute to their sustainable development goals by supporting cotton growers to be as efficient and sustainable as possible. In addition, the industry reports annually on their sustainability position centred around 7 of the 12 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). Planet. People. Paddock⁵ demonstrates the Australian cotton industry's long-standing commitment to being responsible stewards of the land and resources. Tracking performance in Greenhouse Gas Emissions, biodiversity, pesticide use, water, soil health are just part of the everyday operations cotton growers consider.

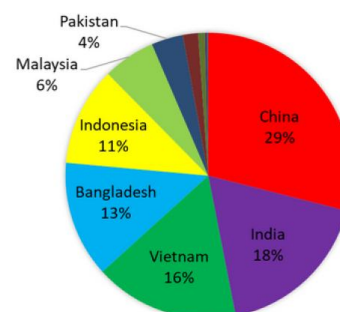
The new Kimberley Cotton Gin is the first of its kind, 100% powered by the renewable hydroelectric scheme from Lake Argyle. Large solar farms have been constructed, and the largest farm is planned for construction by SunCable⁶ in the NT. It must be a priority as to how existing and future potential infrastructure can utilise this resource

The committee must consider, support and value industries that priorities sustainability and ongoing improvement targets just as the cotton industry does and look to strengthen their capacity. Food and fibre security is essential, farming is a forever option, the mining of critical minerals is finite. Perspectives must be considered.

b. Supporting the development of export industries

The opening of the two ginning facilities and the reinstating of First Point of Entry for the Wyndam Port in WA has provided opportunities for direct market access, predominantly into China for raw cotton lint and seed. The chart illustrates the Australian raw cotton lint exports for the 2025 YTD, data supplied by the Australian Cotton Shippers Association³. A total of 920,408 lint bales shipped directly from eastern state ports, now with a small portion from Darwin and Wyndam. Northern Australia is perfectly placed for most Australian cotton markets and should be given priority by government agencies and Ministers to enable this trade directly from the north. Making improvements and upgrades to the northern port facilities is critical. It should be noted that this is for raw lint only not the byproduct of cottonseed. On average 60% of cottonseed is sold to China who utilize this seed in further manufacturing of oil, the used in pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. The remainder remain onshore supplying a high-value protein source for livestock industries, predominantly cattle. The local demand for this feedseed is strong during drought conditions, can be fed whole and will keep livestock alive during extended drought events. For every lint bale produced (227kg) there is approximately 250kg of cottonseed.

AUSTRALIAN COTTON EXPORTS
2025 SEASON YTD SHIPMENTS - to September 30, 2025



The committee must engage in planning, enhancing opportunities and streamlining for direct northern Australia export markets. This is not negotiable. They must not let bureaucratic systems get in the way.

f. Supporting infrastructure

Two newly constructed, state of the art, raw cotton processing facilities, with a combined building construction cost of over \$150million have been operational since 2024, one based in Katherine, NT, the other in Kununurra, WA. The first build in the NT was completed, and its operational costs are completely privately funded, demonstrating the commitment and visions of entrepreneurs who believe in northern Australia. The second, was significantly funded through the NAIF, a Commonwealth Government financier established to enable economic growth, employment and improved social outcomes by financing infrastructure in North Queensland, northern Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, bolstered by private investment and grower shareholders. Further to this, innovative technology that is used to class the raw lint, once ginned, is now centred in the Ord, minimizing the distances travelled to have cotton in the NT and WA classed before entering the market. Prior to these significant infrastructure milestones all cotton grown in northern Australia was trucked by road over into the eastern states for processing, nothing shy of 3000-4000km. These developments are monumental and require continual support by state and federal government agencies to ensure these significant economic contributions to northern Australia remain viable. These infrastructures are the beginning of a broader, larger requirement as the industry matures. Commodity facilities to house lint bales before export and bulk cottonseed, which is used for stockfeed are just one small example of how industry can assist with building a sustainable future. The successful future depends on the government paving the way through transparent and fair legislative frameworks for industry to advance with. Cotton Australia acknowledges the lack of transport, cold storage and processing facilities hindering northern Australia's agricultural efficiency and competitiveness. It recognises long-term outstanding project initiatives having stalled due to red tape in the bureaucratic approvals processes.

The committee must map out a roadmap for infrastructure, enable the integration of supply chains, nationally and globally, strengthening partnerships and business relations for northern Australia.

g. Managing biosecurity risks

The cotton industry prides itself on its capacity, robust methodology, educational awareness and ground-truthed knowledge building efforts towards biosecurity risks. Strong connections with Plant Health Australia allow for open and transparent understanding on the issues that may arise and how to work towards mitigation and solutions. A key resource developed is the National Biosecurity Plan for the Cotton Industry 2024 to ensure its future viability and sustainability, detailing current mitigations and surveillance activities being undertaken, identifying contingency plans, diagnostic protocols and an overarching implementation plan. An increase in threats to northern Australia requires a collaborated and integrated approach as outlined in the Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy 2030⁹. The committee must engage with all relevant agencies and key northern Australia stakeholders to appreciate the complexities of our northern Australian landscape and how this can be enhanced. The reports of illegal fishing boats frequently being spotted along the coastline are one significant cause for alarm that needs immediate addressing. The movement of traveler's and border quarantine is another. The committee should consider the investment in the Northern Australia People Capacity and Response Network (NAPCaRN) whose aim is to bolster Indigenous and industry capability across the north for plant and animals. The coastline of northern Australia remains the most uninhabited area in Australia and requires a focus that goes beyond emerging industries.

h. Training, attracting and retaining skilled workforce

Agriculture in northern Australia is characterised by seasonal variations in workloads. Creating challenges in terms of recruiting and maintaining a workforce that is willing to work during peak periods, often resulting in labour surpluses during off-season periods and occasional worker gluts during certain peak seasonal times. Nationally, the cotton industry employs more than 12,000 people across 150 rural and regional communities, many of which rely heavily on cotton for their economic prosperity, and viability. Each year, Australia grows enough of this high-quality natural fibre to clothe 500 million people.

Emerging industries across northern Australia have the capacity to create local jobs, support economic independence, and address food security by contributing to local economic stability. In recent years the presence of the cotton industry across the north has seen new industry support services position themselves in the north permanently, the reliance on existing businesses and supply service industries has increased, road, rail and export trades have increased, community and educational awareness opportunities about the cotton industry are visionary. The cotton industry compliments the valuable northern cattle industry. Cottonseed is a highly valuable protein source for all livestock. In collaboration, they contribute significantly to Australia's annual export revenues and have necessitated change in the workforce skills requirements for northern Australia. The committee must look to expand training programs and attracting and retaining workforce could be achieved by:

- Aligning programs of works with workforce development initiatives to address skill shortages in agriculture, gaps in logistics, warehousing and agribusiness operations.
- Project developments that generate real jobs in construction, logistics, and agribusiness, providing long-term economic benefits to all regions.
- Ensuring the local workforce is prepared to meet the demands of the expanded agribusiness operations.
- Focusing efforts on First Nations employment opportunities across Northern Australia faces limitations and challenges, many of which are complex and interconnected.⁷ These limitations vary depending on the specific region. Health disparities can be an obstacle to employment, chronic health issues often making it difficult for first nation peoples to work in physically demanding agricultural roles. Language barriers and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings or difficulties within the workplace.

i. Empowering and upskilling local First Nations people

6.9% of people who work in the Australian cotton industry identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS Australian Census) and has been on an upward trajectory since 2011 sustainability, diversity and inclusion reporting. Cotton Australia supports partnering with Indigenous landowners for co-managed farming projects or leasing land for agricultural use to foster trust and support Aboriginal economic development opportunities. The mutual benefits through incorporation of First Nations knowledge and networks that contribute to First Nations self-determination are significant. These may include, should First Nations peoples determine cotton production is appropriate for their land or community:

- Supporting cotton production on land owned by First Nations people (if the land is appropriate for plant-based agriculture, and it is wanted by the owners of that land)
- Supporting economic co-benefits, such as applying industry knowledge, contacts and logistics to support the development of bush food and/or native cotton industries
- Providing biodiversity assessments and sharing knowledge of country in return for sharing biodiversity credits or market premiums

- Increasing capability-building and employment in cotton producing areas, across all the on-farm and off-farm skilled and unskilled positions within the cotton industry value chain

Northern Australia has an indigenous population of 230,000 which is 17.4% of northern Australia's populations. 78% of northern Australia is covered by indigenous rights and interests. To achieve a mutually beneficial outcomes for First Nations across northern Australia a concerted effort needs to be undertaken to understand the valuable contributions First Nations make toward primary production industries and the extent to which agricultural production takes place on Indigenous estates. An example of successful and meaningful partnerships can be demonstrated by the positive agreements in place with the MG Corporation and agricultural production systems within the Ord Valley, Eastern Kimberley's of WA. Successful ILUA's have been signed by MG Corporation and other corporate entities and government enhancing and strengthening inclusion in economic developments and opportunities.

The committee must prioritise fit-for-purpose programs in collaboration with emerging industries to understand and value the role of First Nations people and the skills gaps required to strengthen industry. These programs must be underpinned by incentives and working for a purpose.

k. Research and Development

A compulsory levy for research and development is paid by all cotton growers with a set price per bale. This revenue is matched annually by the Australian Government under the *Primary Industries Research and Development Act 1989*⁴. Cotton Research and Development Corporation exists to grow the sustainable future of cotton through innovation with impact. All investments are guided by the CRDC Strategic RD&E Plan 2023-28, 'Clever Cotton'. On average over \$20million is invested annually towards research and development.

The committee must look closely at the opportunities that exist across northern Australia in emerging industries, those that have well developed priorities for research and development and learn how this can be continued with an emphasis on cross-jurisdictional partners and work. The northern environment is unique and does not fit into a one-size fits all approach federal government lean towards as a matter of efficiency. Funding must be specifically for advancing northern industries separately from our southern counterparts.

3. Conclusion

The Australian cotton industry prides itself as collaborative and transparent, with close professional partnerships with all industry, government agencies, and stakeholders across Australia, including well respected and active global partnerships. We are aware of the current and long-standing erosion of trust amongst stakeholders and government departments that requires a strategic and robust rebuild. Stakeholders are wary of social or legal conflicts and damaging reputational risks because of the incorrect assumption of inadequate community consultation that is continuously portrayed in the media influence.

Cotton holds transformative potential for northern Australia, capable of contributing significantly to regional economic growth, employment, agricultural diversification, and to derisking many future agricultural investments. Realising this potential requires leveraging the opportunities and strengths while addressing the areas of weaknesses. Foundations outlined in the Northern Australia Action Plan 2024-2029¹⁰ can reaffirm the committee's capacity to recognise, support and prepare for emerging industries across northern Australia.

The role of the committee under the Terms of Reference must ensure vision, rigour, and foresight to assist with mitigating inherent risks and barriers, and to provide the circuit-breaker needed to prepare for emerging industries across northern Australia. This must be the

committees charter, to consider all the recommendations provided in this submission and others to strengthen the prosperity and to adequately prepare for emerging industries across northern Australia and to enable the provision of the north to the broader national productivity agenda. The emerging northern cotton industry is open to further engagement with the committee as they navigate the next future stage for northern Australia.

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⁷[Employment of First Nations people - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

⁸[Cotton-Biosecurity-Plan-V4.0.pdf](#)

⁹[Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy 2020 - 2030](#)

¹⁰[Northern Australia Action Plan 2024–2029 | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts](#)

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