

## Neu Power, CEO: Look north and create a vision for the future



The Northern Australia Investment Forum held in Darwin this month was a landmark event, recognising the Government's commitment to the attraction of crucial new investment into northern Australia.

Business leaders, Federal and State governments and significant investors from more than 20 countries attended the forum. Its outcomes should help shape the next phase of development of the north of our great country.

We can all reflect on how different the Australia of today might be if the first European settlements had been established in the tropics rather than on the shores of Botany Bay, the south-west of WA or Tasmania.

Without dwelling on what might have been, the fact is that northern Australia now provides a wealth of untapped potential.

WA is in the same time zone as much of Asia and all of China, facilitating business relationships and regional travel.

And all of northern Australia has the geographic proximity to those markets that ensures we also have a significant shipping advantage, another key factor in our favour.

In order for northern Australia's enormous potential to be fully realised, a clear focus will be required by governments at all levels, business and the community.

Creating a future vision for our own Pilbara region in WA will be a vital first step on this path. Great work has been done on the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia and the Regional Investment Blueprint released by the Pilbara Development Commission.

Both papers provide clear vision, and most importantly, a well-marked roadmap towards the end goal.

Development and investments by mining, resource and energy companies across northern Australia have provided the catalyst for major regional development to date and will be one of the key sectors that will contribute to the next phase.

We can also look to our neighbours on the east coast, with towns such as Mackay and Townsville providing great examples of vibrant, sustainable communities that have grown with the workforces for their key industry sectors.

The percentage of fly-in, fly-out workers in Queensland's Bowen Basin is under 20 per cent, substantially less than the estimated 60 per cent for our Pilbara region.

As we embark on this next phase, our focus must be on building our towns in the Pilbara into vibrant and sustainable communities that will attract and retain the workforce and families for those key industry sectors and companies to thrive.

This means having a workforce that's driving and not flying to site, with the permanent population of our towns growing as families move away from the cities to enjoy the lifestyle that regional towns can offer.

Business, governments and communities working together will give us the best opportunity to achieve this goal.

Governments must not only provide the core health and education services but must also ensure that these are targeted to the needs of the workforce we want to attract.

To this end, health services should feature care for pregnant women, maternity hospitals should be first-rate and paediatric specialists should be readily available to complement the services provided by general practitioners and community medical centres.

Our education providers - private and public - need to provide options for the kindergarten, primary and secondary levels as well as access to continued learning for technical trades, degree qualifications and personal development.

At the same time, business will provide the jobs, training and primary income while continuing to build the capability in infrastructure, energy and transportation that all contribute to our region's competitive advantage.

Finally, community organisations will play an important role in building the social fabric through arts, culture, sporting and recreational activities, which must all be at a level that will make the regional lifestyle at least comparable, if not more attractive, to the bigger cities.

Companies such as Fortescue Metals Group will also contribute through their community engagement and continued efforts to end Aboriginal disparity through training, employment and business opportunities.

Commitment to a shared vision for the Pilbara and for northern Australia will position us strongly to attract and retain a diverse workforce, build our industries and grow sustainable communities for the future.

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