

Water scientist endorses northern agriculture push

By Jane Bardon

Posted Tue Apr 22, 2008 6:00pm AEST

After endorsement from the 2020 Summit and the Federal Government, the push is now on to expand agriculture in northern Australia.

Critics say farmers have already misused scarce water resources in the south and damaged northern waters through schemes like the damming of the Ord River.

Scientists agree climate change will mean a drier southern Australia.

Chairman of the CSIRO's Water for a Healthy Country Program, Don Blackmore, says Australia can expand farming in the north without repeating the environmental mistakes of the past.

"There are very positive opportunities in northern Australia - it will be a mosaic of outcomes," he said.

"We won't make the same mistakes as we did in the south by not understanding the biophysical setting, the salinity setting and all those things.

"Whether we lead development there, it will go there by itself, but it would be better for us to get on the front foot and start leading it."

There are also going to be tough choices about how farmers use what little water there is in southern Australia.

Don Blackmore says 20 per cent of southern irrigated agriculture could be stopped because of lack of water as the south dries without taking a dollar off the national balance sheet because water is not always going into the highest value crops.

Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan has been leading the political push for agriculture to move north.

He says it could all be jeopardised by massive expansion of tree plantations through Managed Investment Schemes and a national carbon emissions trading scheme.

"It's a serious mistake that some of the best potential lands in one of the world's last agricultural frontiers, like the Douglas Daly area around Katherine, that its satisfactory for financial instruments to grow tax driven trees when the world is crying out for food," he said.

"The serious error made under the 2020 Forest Vision was they were exempt from environmental planning because we know that in 40-inch (100-centimetre) rainfall areas a monoculture forest will take 2.5 megalitres per hectare out of a catchment. Surely its time to impose some environmental planning on forestry."