

# FDI Feature Interview

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## South African Taps into Kimberley Potential

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### Key Points

- Indonesian cattle exports face uncertain future as Indonesia seeks self-sufficiency
- Summer cropping gives cattle breeders scope for income security
- Soil and water conditions provide Kimberley with significant untapped potential
- South African farmers, eager to come to Australia, would bring new farming methods that would lift farm production levels

### Background

As the future of the cattle livestock export market to Indonesia looks increasingly uncertain, first as a result of Indonesia's desire for self sufficiency and more recently, as a result of the Australian Government's decision to temporarily ban export because of animal welfare concerns, Future Directions International Research Manager **Gary Kleyn** speaks to a farmer in Western Australia's Kimberley Region who is keen to diversity into summer crops using techniques well developed in his homeland. Given the freedom to diversify by the State Government, his activities could provide new life to the region's station owners.

### Analysis

Through maximising water retention in the soil, the Kimberley region of Western Australia has the potential to be the breadbasket not only of Australia, but a significant provider to the rest of the world and one farmer from out of South Africa is setting about showing how it can be achieved. He believes that if the Kimberley land was opened up to South African farmers, who are used to growing in similar condition, it will capture the agricultural potential of the region.

Over the past two years it has become apparent to Nico Botha that having one income stream, dependent on the whims of foreign buyers was fraught with financial danger. This

became apparent to the Fitzroy Crossing cattle farmer when the Indonesian government started restricting the amount of cattle it would import as well as the stipulations it put in place for the size of the cattle. Indonesia is seeking to become more self sufficient.

The Indonesian decision, however, highlighted the vulnerability of the cattle industry of Northern Australia. Mr Botha is developing an alternative income stream through summer cropping. While Australian farmers tend to rely on winter crops, the South African farmers are successful with summer crops. Operating the 205,000 hectare Beefwood Park Station and the 660,000 hectare Moola Bulla Station, in the past year Mr Botha has sown 1,400 hectares of maize and sorghum. While not very well known in the region, the crops are flourishing under the Kimberley sun - in the middle of summer and without irrigation.

Mr Botha says that South African farmers are familiar with summer cropping.

“We know summer crops. In South Africa, maize is the number one crop. We know how to preserve moisture in the soil,” he said.

With minimal amount of fertiliser, the crops are talking off. The secret rests with proper soil management. The Kimberley soil is sandy, limey and very fertile. Prior to seeding the ground is ripped up to a metre deep to create a water channel under the crop. The rainwater is then captured in the top metre of soil. Once the soil profile is good, Mr Botha believes it is possible to grow anything. While the station has the option of irrigating, the current system of using rainfall and maintaining moisture content in the soil is working adequately. Should the farmer decide to use the aquifer he can do so as he claims to be sitting on the biggest aquifer in the Kimberley. Maintaining water in the soil also means that the crop can be safeguarded against dry seasons. The average rainfall is between 400 and 450 millimetres a year. Last year, however, just 150 millimetres fell. Yet, even in such low rainfall conditions the crop yield is still expected to be healthy at around five tonnes per hectare. With better management practices and using fertiliser this could improve further.

With the crop barely in, Mr Botha is forecasting an even bigger planting next year. He is hoping to introduce 1,000 hectares of soybeans in addition to 1000 hectares each of maize and sorghum. Rotation cropping will be introduced so that the maize and sorghum can benefit from the protein and nitrogen that the soybeans will put back into the soil.

Mr Botha says the current Western Australian government has shown support for diversification, offering diversification permits which have allowed the farmer to venture into other agricultural streams.

In the future sunflowers may be considered as an additional means of developing biofuel. Sunflowers have 36 per cent oil content compared to 22 per cent in Canola, so are more efficient oil produces. The next step would be to bring in a \$30,000 biofuel unit so that the farm can be fuel self-sufficient as well as sell to the neighbours.

The farmer believes there is significant potential in attracting South African farmers, many with decades of experience growing in conditions not unlike that in their home country. The greatest stumbling block to achieving this appears to be tough migration laws with many not allowed into Australia to work.

By comparison, Georgia as well as many African countries is engaged in a competitive marketing campaign in order to attract the estimated 40,000 white farmers that still remain in South Africa. (See: [Australia Missing in Action as Nations Entice South African Farmers](#))

“If you were to bring 50 South African farmers into the Kimberley it will be just maize both sides of the road from Kununurra to Derby,” Mr Botha said.

“We have to feed the world and we can certainly do that in the Kimberley”

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*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.*

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