

NT CASE STUDY

SNAPSHOT FACTS:

Conference Name:	Northern Australia Food Futures Conference 2021
Dates:	17-21 May 2021
Host organisation:	NT Farmers Association
Number of delegates:	500 Delegates
Delegate origin:	From throughout Australia
NT location:	Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia
Conference venue:	Darwin Convention Centre
PCO/Event Organiser:	AA&P Events

Event Overview:

The Northern Australia Food Futures Conference aims to promote the development of agriculture across northern Australia and to raise the profile of this region.

As the leading conference on agricultural development in the north of Australia, this biennial event attracts investors, politicians, industry and community stakeholders from throughout the country.

The four-day conference attracted 500 participants across all conference events, which was a record for delegate attendance. The 2021 Food Futures Conference was the largest held to date, with 78% of delegates coming from interstate and more than 50% of attendees coming from the private sector.

The conference, now in its fourth year, focuses on the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland and is strongly supported by the governments of those regions. In 2021, six State and Territory Government Ministers attended, as well as representatives from Federal Parliament.

The National Farmers Federation, Hort Innovation, Cotton Australia and the private sector also supported the 2021 conference.

The conference theme was 'Development and the Environment', with insights aiming to assist investors and industry to profit from sustainable agricultural development, whilst also protecting environmental resources.

Why Darwin?

With Darwin having been labelled the 'Come Back Capital', it was widely regarded as a safe destination to visit, giving delegates confidence to attend the conference. Being held at the start of the NT's 'Dry Season', interstate delegates were able to enjoy the warm temperatures and escape the cold winter weather in the southern States.

As the only capital city located in Northern Australia, Darwin offered a modern city experience for delegates, as well as providing close proximity to working farms for field trips, along with unique venues for the social functions held during the conference.

Challenges and Triumphs:

Due to Covid travel restrictions and border closures, the conference date was moved three times, requiring significant program and planning changes and presenting logistical challenges.

The level of sponsor and exhibitor participation was the highest ever achieved for a Food Futures Conference, requiring expansion into a third hall at the Darwin Convention Centre.

The Convention Centre greatly assisted organisers with short-notice requests, such as an exhibitor request for a 16-tonne tractor to be set up in the exhibition space, which necessitated a re-design of the floor plan and exhibition showcase.

The conference was originally confirmed for 280 delegates but final attendance across all events grew to 500, with many registrations coming in the final weeks. The Convention Centre was able to accommodate the significant increase in delegates thanks to ready availability of food and beverage stocks in Darwin.

During the conference, NT Farmers and AA&P Events liaised closely with the Darwin Convention Centre to implement Covid-safe best practice and management. This included contact tracing for all attendees, extra cleaning of high touch-point areas, sanitisation stations and signage.

A dedicated Covid Marshall was also provided by AA&P Events for the duration of the event. Supported by the Centre's Security team, her role was to remind delegates to stay safe, socially distance, wash hands regularly and ensure that hand sanitiser was easily available.

The Execution:

The Food Futures Conference program encompassed plenary sessions, workshops, concurrent sessions, field trips and three social functions.

The conference featured over 70 speaker presentations across the four days, with the opening address delivered by The Honourable Nicole Manison, NT Government Minister for Agribusiness and Aquaculture.

A range of industry experts delivered keynote presentations on topics relevant to established and emerging agricultural sectors in the north of Australia. Speakers included successful agribusiness operators from Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland, as well as traditional land owners, environmental activists, scientists and Government Ministers.

Concurrent elective workshops were staged across four rooms at the Darwin Convention Centre, with key plenary sessions also held onsite.

The conference included an exhibition component, with 39 exhibitors representing a diverse array of private sector companies, suppliers, industry associations, government agencies and agriculture sector organisations.

Two additional satellite events, the *National Farmers' Federation Forum* and the *Tropical Fruit Symposium* held immediately following the Food Futures Conference, provided extra value for delegates and industry members, especially those travelling from interstate.

Field Trips showcased successful Northern Territory farming operations and included farms and developments in the Darwin area such as the Export Hub, Humpty Doo Barramundi plus mango and melon farms. Key supply chain businesses such as Darwin Airport and the Port of Darwin were also included as part of the field trip itinerary.

How was Darwin Convention Centre as the host venue for Food Futures Conference?

Organisers indicated that since the inaugural conference in 2014, Darwin Convention Centre has gone above and beyond in supporting NT Farmers and AA&P Events to deliver a conference to the highest possible standard. The handling of last minute requests and accommodating a significant increase in delegate numbers in 2021 highlighted the Centre's flexibility.

The team from *Dreamedia*, the Darwin Convention Centre's in-house audio-visual provider, offered ideas, solutions and support to ensure AV requirements and expectations were not only met but exceeded.

AA&P Events advised that the Convention Centre team played a crucial role in assisting with the delivery of this highly successful conference. They noted that the breadth of support ranged from the Centre's business development team, event co-ordinators, the bump-in and bump-out crews, chefs plus food and beverage department through to security, cleaners and all other staff.

Social Programme:

A Welcome Reception was staged for invited guests at the Northern Territory Government's Parliament House, located on State Square in the centre of Darwin city. The event was hosted by The Honourable Nicole Manison MLA, the Northern Territory Government's Minister for Agribusiness and Aquaculture.

An Industry Night was held at *Barramundi Adventures Darwin*, a land-based recreational barramundi-fishing farm at Berry Springs, on the southern end of Darwin Harbour. The property's onsite boat ramp makes the farm just 20 minutes from Darwin by water or it can be accessed in 40 minutes by road. The interstate delegates embraced this true NT experience, which included food vans serving Territory-inspired food and the opportunity to watch a magnificent Top End sunset while catching a "barra".

The Gala Dinner staged at the Darwin Convention Centre was a highlight of the social program. Guests were firstly welcomed with cocktails in the exhibition area. The dinner was staged in Hall One, which had been in use during the day for a plenary session. Doors to the dinner venue were kept shut until a surprise 'reveal' showed the former conference plenary space transformed into a glamorous setting for the dinner and awards night. Territory produce featured prominently on the menu, which was inspired by the Convention Centre's impressive 'Seven Seasons' offering which showcases the culture and cuisine of the local Traditional Owners, the Larrakia people. Dishes included salt bush pumpkin mousse, wattleseed-rubbed beef ribeye and lemon myrtle cr me brulee.

Bespoke NT touches to your event:

The conference commenced with a 'Welcome to Country' delivered by Bilawara Lee, a respected Elder of the Larrakia Nation, which incorporates the Darwin region of the Northern Territory. Ms Lee is acknowledged internationally as a community communicator, healer and teacher of ancient wisdoms and is also an internationally published author.

Corporate Social Responsibility/local community engagement:

The Food Futures Conference provided an opportunity for NT Farmers to raise money for the NT's neighbours in Timor Leste who had recently been affected by devastating floods. Timor Leste seasonal workers have a long history of assisting farmers across the Australian agricultural sector, so this was an opportunity for NT Farmers to provide support and financial assistance. Over \$18,000 was raised for the Timor Leste Appeal.

How did the Northern Territory Business Events (NTBE) assist your conference?

Northern Territory Business Events was an event sponsor of the Food Futures Conference, supporting promotion of the destination as well as the event itself. This strong support enhanced the business case for the conference to be held in Darwin in 2021.

What you liked most about the destination:

Organisers advised that Darwin offered a modern and multicultural experience for interstate delegates, being the only capital city located in Northern Australia and strategically positioned between Western Australia and Queensland. The Darwin Convention Centre was conveniently located near restaurants, accommodation and leisure activity options at the Darwin Waterfront. Darwin also offered easy proximity to working farms for the field trips, which are a key component of the conference. Unique venues for the social functions also enabled delegates to immerse themselves in the Top End lifestyle.

Most memorable aspect of the entire event:

Alongside the excellent speakers' program, interactive exhibition showcase, social events and field trips, the conference provided an important opportunity for delegates to make new connections and network with industry stakeholders, Government ministers, decision-makers and thought leaders from across Northern Australia.

Any pre and post touring undertaken in the destination?

Many interstate delegates made most of the opportunity to holiday and explore the Top End, both pre and post conference, with experiences including fishing trips plus tours to Litchfield National Park.

The Verdict:

Excellent feedback was received from delegates and sponsors regarding the conference program format and content. The conference organisers commented very favourably about the Darwin Convention Centre as the host venue.

"The Darwin Convention Centre provided a highly-professional and hardworking team who go above and beyond to work with you and support your team to ensure the success of your conference. Located

in the heart of the Darwin Waterfront Precinct, it offers easy access to hotels and restaurants and is only a short walk to the Darwin CBD, making it a highly accessible and convenient venue.”

Natalie Bell
Managing Director
AA&P Events