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PRIME MINISTER

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C.S.I.R.O. RANGE LANDS' LABORATORY ALICE SPRINGS

It's twelve months almost to the day that I last visited Alice Springs. I enjoyed myself immensely last time, and I was delighted to receive this invitation to open the C.S.I.R.O.'s new Range Land's Laboratory.

Knowing the C.S.I.R.O. scientists' awesome thirst for knowledge, it's not surprising that the C.S.I.R.O. has played such a prominent role in rangelands research. The C.S.I.R.O. team is part of a national range lands' team and has become a focal point for range lands' activities. Australia must develop management principles and practices which will maintain the range lands in a stable and productive condition. We look to the C.S.I.R.O. team to provide the lead.

It's not often realised that about 75 percent of Australia lacks sufficient rainfall for crop production or for pasture improvement. With so much of our country arid or semi-arid, and bearing in mind the contribution the range lands make to Australia's agricultural export income, the establishment of the C.S.I.R.O. central Australian laboratory in Alice Springs assumes major importance.

It has been estimated that over-grazing by sheep and cattle has severely degraded 30 percent of the rangelands. In some cases, the damage may be practically irreversible. But fortunately, over most of the continent either the condition of the range lands can be improved, or further degradation prevented.

This research will help agriculture by contributing to the long-term stability of the land and vegetation. It is also essential for the future viability of the pastoral and tourist industries, for the conservation of our unique flora and fauna and most importantly for the welfare of the Aboriginal population living in the area.

The research work is done on commercially operating properties. While this imposes some restrictions, it has the advantage of presenting a full range of environments for study, under "real-life" conditions.

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The C.S.I.R.O. has been involved with central Australia for some 25 years and has notched up some important successes. For example, the land surveys of the 1950's provided for the first time an accurate inventory of central Australia's climatic and land resources. The maps produced have proved invaluable to a great number of Government departments and other sections of the community.

Another early activity in the district was plant introduction. Over 400 potentially useful grasses and shrubs from all over the world were introduced and thoroughly tested over a ten to fifteen year period. The results were disappointing. None of the introductions fared as well in our poor soils and erratic rainfall as our own native species. Although disappointing, the results highlight the need for good husbandry of our native pastures. We cannot expect to find any wonder plants to replace them. However, six of the introduced species--the ones which fared best in the local conditions--were used in replanting areas around the Alice Springs' Airport. They assisted to reduce the dust problem which plagued Alice Springs during prolonged bouts of dry weather. I'm sure that plants that reduce dust would be appreciated in Canberra, especially when Parliament is sitting.

The research programme of this laboratory is directed to the problems and welfare of the central Australian region. Its research will also benefit Australia's vast arid zone, and similar zones overseas. For example, during my visit to India earlier this year it was agreed that there should be discussions between our two countries on ways of expanding our co-operation in various scientific fields.

At this very moment there is a delegation of Australian scientists in India -- some of whom are from the C.S.I.R.O. -- who are discussing arid and semi-arid zone research with their Indian counterparts. These discussions build on the close working relationship between the C.S.I.R.O. range lands' group and the "Rajasthan Central Arid Zone Research Institute" in Jodhpur, India. I've no doubt that this new laboratory will provide further opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and experience between our two countries.

Thank you once again for inviting me here today. I have pleasure in declaring open the C.S.I.R.O. Central Australian Laboratory.