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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING THE COOPERATIVE RESEARCH
CENTRE FOR PLANT SCIENCE
CANBERRA - 26 SEPTEMBER 1991**

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Governments must grapple with - and overcome - a host of urgent problems on a day to day basis. But, while we're doing that, we have to keep the broader strategy in view, to stick to the game plan, and to take those decisions which will benefit Australia in the longer term.

So it is particularly satisfying to have an opportunity to step aside from the cut and thrust of the day to day, to participate in the fruition of a long term policy launch.

Today, we celebrate a further step in the realisation of a major commitment by my Government to Australia's future.

Our commitment to the Cooperative Research Centres Program forms an important part of the wider, longer term vision of the kind of Australia we are seeking to build; an Australia which will increasingly be able to pay its way in the world with the currency of its creative skills and technology, to further expand the provision of secondary and tertiary goods and services to our established position as a world class supplier of primary products.

In March this year I outlined the elements of the Government's strategy for achieving these goals in my statement to Parliament, 'Building a Competitive Australia'.

That statement was about what we must do together, in meeting the economic challenges facing this country; about putting in place the right policy framework to build an internationally competitive economy; and about utilising our resources and mobilising our talents to build our future.

The Cooperative Research Centres Program is a key element of this framework. It will see the establishment of up to fifty Centres, of which the first fifteen were announced in my Parliamentary Statement.

This occasion marks the culmination of that selection process for one of those fifteen, the Cooperative Research Centre for Plant Science.

The first fifteen Centres were chosen because of the demonstrated excellence of their proposed programs of cooperative research, the quality of the researchers they gathered together, their sound education programs and the active involvement of industry groups and other research users.

It is through initiatives such as the CRC Program that Australian ingenuity is given expression and direction in our national research and development effort, with direct benefits to the Australian economy, as well as to our overall strategic goals as a nation.

The Commonwealth Government is providing substantial funding support for the Program and will be contributing $100 million annually in 1990 dollars when the Program is fully underway. These funds will be very significant in triggering broader support.

The first fifteen Centres for instance, are expected to mobilise additional resources from State Governments and instrumentalities, CSIRO and related organisations, universities and the private sector, so that for every dollar the Commonwealth provides, almost $2.50 in cash and kind will be contributed by these sources. This adds up to an impressive figure, demonstrating the commitment of all parties to the Program.

The CRC Program, however, is not just about increasing available research dollars. It is also about better utilising our existing research resources, building on existing strengths, consolidating research infrastructure and ensuring that research is directed at meeting the needs of research users.

As we all know, Australia has produced many world class researchers - indeed several are here with us today - and what makes the Cooperative Research Centres Program so exciting is the way it will provide these researchers with new opportunities to work together.

They will be backed by a concentration of equipment and associated facilities which are essential to building and maintaining a leading edge in research.

It will also allow researchers to link more effectively with end users in industry and Government. This is essential if the multitude of good ideas that will arise in such productive environments are to result in tangible benefits to all Australians.

The Centres have also established integrated and innovative education components in their programs. These components will play a major role in enhancing the quality and skill levels of Australian science and engineering students.

These students, our next generation of researchers, will be able to train with some of the best research scientists and engineers in Australia. Their contact with researchers from outside the Universities will be particularly valuable, exposing them to the kinds of R&D challenges faced by leading edge companies and research organisations.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Plant Science is a good example of the CRC concept in practice. It is a partnership between the Australian National University, the CSIRO Division of Plant Industry and Biocem [pronounced Biosem] Pacific. It will be a Centre of excellence in its field and add to the international reputation its constituent partners have already gained.

Most of you will be well aware of the group's significant contributions in such areas as the CSIRO's involvement in the breakthrough 'gene shears' technology, and the ANU group's discovery of a technique to screen plants for their water use efficiency, which could increase wheat production in years of low rainfall.

This Centre will be playing a major role in research and training relating to modern plant biology and ecologically sustainable agriculture. It will support and stimulate Australia's rural industries with better plants, and new plant based products.

Because of the importance of rural industries to Australia's economy it can be expected that any major research breakthrough, any technical edge, will have a direct and significant impact on our overall trade and economy.

The Centre's program target three major areas - research, education, and liaison with industry.

The research component will focus on learning how to control plant growth, improving plant quality and assisting plants to resist pests and diseases.

The education component appears particularly innovative. It aims not only to provide high level research training, but also to foster plant science at primary and secondary school levels to ensure more students are attracted into plant science, agriculture and environmental science.

In addition to its association with Biocem Pacific, the Centre will be encouraging further direct partnerships with other industrial enterprises.

The Centre will initially be funded for seven years. Its operating costs over that period will total to over $37 million, of which the Commonwealth will be providing more than $15 million.

It remains to me to wish the Centre's Co-directors, Dr Jim Peacock of the CSIRO and Professor Brian Gunning of the ANU, together with Dr Eric Huttner of Biocem Pacific, and all those who will be working with them under the auspices of this Cooperative Research Centre, the very best for their future endeavours.

It is now with great pleasure that I declare open the Cooperative Research Centre for Plant Science.

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