Opportunities for the Territory to play a greater role in national and regional food security are at the top of the agenda at the Northern Australian Food Futures Conference in Darwin.

“This is the first major conference looking at the challenges of northern agribusiness in more than 30 years,” Chief Minister Adam Giles told delegates this morning while opening proceedings.

“It comes at a time when the entire country is looking to the North for its economic future and I am thrilled to see more than 300 delegates in town to discuss development of this sector.

“The Territory is advantaged by our long-standing relationships with our Asian neighbours, our proximity to their ports and their massive markets, as well as our quality products.

“New trade figures released today show the Territory’s international trade goods surplus widened from $712 million in the year to September 2013 to $3.2 billion in the year to September 2014 – an increase of 350 per cent. We have the products that our Asian neighbours need and food fast climbing up that list.

“The fact is that two thirds of the world’s middle class is expected to be living in the Asia Pacific region by 2030 and these people will have a growing appetite for higher quality food that Northern Australia can help meet.

“This conference is about identifying the things both Government and private industry can do to make the most of these food opportunities across our region.

“The Giles Government has already made important changes to the Pastoral Land Act that allow land holders to diversify their business, meaning that properties that were formerly exclusively pastoral can now explore a range of horticultural and other opportunities.

“My Government is also starting work with a range of Indigenous communities in Northern Australia to participate in agribusiness, most notably on the Tiwi Islands where forestry is a growing enterprise.
Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries Willem Westra van Holthe will be making a keynote address at the conference tomorrow morning.

“Producers, processors, growers and investors will play a huge role in developing the North so it is important we get our policies right,” Mr Westra van Holthe said.

“I look forward to outlining the Government’s plan to industry and also meeting and discussing our vision with stakeholders – it’s important to hear concerns and ideas first hand.”

On the first day of the conference, delegates will hear from farmers about what has and hasn’t worked in agricultural development in Northern Australia and why.

Tomorrow delegates will hear from the Federal Minister for Agriculture Barnaby Joyce and the Territory Agriculture Minister Willem Westra van Holthe. Delegates will explore opportunities for potential new industries as part of the Northern Australia Development push.

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