

SE Business  
HD **Caution shown on agri potential**  
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DON'T expect the dining boom to overtake the **mining** boom anytime soon. That was the message yesterday from business leaders amid ongoing hype about Australia's role in feeding the rising middle class of Asia.

Asked whether he might follow in the footsteps of miners Andrew Forrest and Gina Rinehart and seek to invest in beef or other agribusinesses, Woodside Petroleum chairman Michael Chaney said such diversification was not part of Woodside's plans.

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"Woodside is likely to be building on its strengths and staying in the petroleum business that it's in," he told The Australian & Deutsche Bank Business Leaders Forum in Perth.

"Notwithstanding the importance of the sector — I think the food and agribusiness sector has a really important role to play in Australia — I don't think it can replace **mining** in its importance in the foreseeable future, but it's a pretty exciting area." Mr Forrest, the founder of Fortescue Metals Group, bought Western Australia's biggest beef producer, Harvey Beef, for more than \$30 **million** in May, seeking to capitalise on **China**'s booming demand for Australian food.

Mrs Rinehart then paid about \$40m for a 50 per cent **stake** in two vast Kimberley cattle stations in a joint venture with private **company** Dowford Investments, which is owned by the Laitt family.

Mrs Rinehart and Mr Forrest have grown rich from **China**'s soaring demand for the Pilbara's **iron ore**, and they view Australian beef as having similar potential.

Mr Chaney said if he was chairman of Perth conglomerate Wesfarmers, where he was once chief executive, he might look at buying a **company** such as Harvey Beef.

"But if Woodside bought Harvey Beef, I think there'd be some serious scratching of heads," he said.

Some business leaders have questioned whether Australia's "food bowl" ambitions are realistic.

Stockbroker and agriculture investor Colin Bell told The Australian this week that the nation had neither the water supplies nor the arable land to be able to meet Asian demand for food.

But Rio Tinto chief executive Sam Walsh described agriculture as a "huge opportunity" for Australia. "These are critical issues; critical issues for the world, but critical issues for Australia and, let me say, an opportunity for Australia," he said. "With the mass of land that we've got, with the expertise that we've got in relation to agriculture, it's a huge opportunity."

CO wodpet : Woodside Petroleum Ltd  
IN i1 : Energy | i13 : Crude Oil/Natural Gas | i1300003 : Crude Petroleum Extraction | iextra : Natural Gas/Oil Extraction  
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