

PROJECT 25

Putting the future of water quality back in growers' hands

Leading growers in the Cairns region are playing a key role in a pilot scientific program that could redefine our understanding of water quality running off cane lands.

For years, growers have been told their activities are harming the Great Barrier Reef through run-off of sediment, pesticides and fertiliser.

Research on the issue is often very broad or confined to individual plots. The results of this research are then modelled to predict the source of runoff and impact on water quality.

Farmers have grown increasingly frustrated due to poor communication between science and industry, with many growers first reading about research results in media articles that often paint the cane industry as villains, instead of as integral stakeholders whose practices are vital to protecting the Reef from damage.

However, a new project aims to change this dynamic and get growers back involved in the water quality improvement process.

"Project 25" is a water quality monitoring initiative launched by Environment Minister Greg Hunt in September 2015.

The project, which is funded by the Tropical Water Quality Hub of the Australian Government's National

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TropWATER's Dr Aaron Davis takes water samples from the Russell-Mulgrave river catchment

Environmental Science Programme (NESP), focuses on using new technology to carry out detailed sub-catchment-scale monitoring of water quality in the Russell-Mulgrave river catchment, south of Cairns.

The project has been co-designed by cane farmers and scientists, and will be carried out in partnership throughout its entire three-year duration.

Project 25 will allow scientists to form a detailed picture of water quality impacts throughout the catchment based on real-world measurement.

This includes sampling at the boundary between tropical rainforest (where river water is untouched by human activity) and at key points through the river's course along the coastal plain, including before and after major urban infrastructure, such as the Gordonvale sewage facility.

All of this is designed to find out exactly what is going into the water and exactly where it is coming from.

Growers have been involved in Project 25 from its inception, with Tropical Water Quality Hub leaders meeting with growers and industry representatives, including CANEGROWERS' Matt Kealley, in Gordonvale earlier this year.

That involvement hasn't been limited to simply letting researchers onto their property, with growers like Barry Stubbs from Miriwinni playing a key part in the planning process by identifying the best sampling sites.

Barry said an accurate measurement of water quality was vital to the conservation process.

"We're starting from scratch with this one," he said.

"We must have accurate measurements because we don't know whether the problem is ours or someone else's. That's one of the reasons farmers haven't come on board to date, because they don't believe that what they're getting accused of is actually their problem."

The Tropical Water Quality Hub is managed by the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) in Cairns.

RRRC managing director **Sheriden Morris** said the project has been designed from the very beginning to revolve around farmer input.

"When you try to look after the Reef, it's essential that the key players are involved, especially the cane industry. It isn't acceptable to have a researcher turn up, sample at the river mouth and start attributing blame. That's not incentive to progress to a better outcome," she said.

"Farmers all over have been putting in the hard yards for years, updating their practices through programs like Smartcane BMP and Reef Rescue. Where good progress has been made, there hasn't been sufficient recognition for that.

"When growers get ignored or demonised in the media, that breaks down trust and it's a poor outcome for everyone.

Project 25 is about putting the control back into the hands of farmers and making sure they're a key part of collecting the information and delivering conservation outcomes." ■