

**Bush Banter column
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Project aims to improve water quality

Mackay Whitsunday cane growers commit time and money to improve the water quality of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Mackay Whitsunday Isaac Sustainable Agriculture Cane Project is aiming to improve the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef lagoon by targeting reductions in nutrient and herbicide loads and facilitating the adoption of management practice change.

Funding for this project is provided by the Australian Government under the Reef Trust Phase 3 Investment Programme. Lead by Reef Catchments, this project commenced in July 2016 and concludes in June 2019. The project is now fully subscribed and has reached its grower participation target.

Our region's cane growers are to be complimented for their commitment of their own time, resources and money to protect the Great Barrier Reef. 244 growers, farming 35,587 ha of cane, have actively participated in the project and taken up the opportunity to access \$838,000 worth of major grants to assist with equipment upgrades that fast-track practice change to improve nutrient and herbicide management.

Growers have contributed a minimum of 60% of their own funds, with Reef Catchments providing 40% to a maximum of \$15,000. Examples of equipment upgrades for which farmers have received grants include:

- Spray rig upgrades and high-rise tractors that reduce the use of residual herbicide
- Variable rate fertiliser controllers that target the actual yield on individual cane blocks e.g. late harvest and late ratoons.

Each grower has also had the option to access a small grant of \$1,500 to assist with purchase of upgrades to spray equipment, conduct soil tests, EM Mapping, and G-Dots.

Extension and planning for nutrient and herbicide management has been provided to each grower via local service providers MAPS, PCPSL, Farmacist and Soil and Land Surveys. Training, workshops and field days have been held to support the project by providing practical applications for improved nutrient and herbicide application strategies. A selection of grower case studies are available on the Reef Catchments' website.

The Reef Trust 3 project is a strong collaboration of growers, industry, Reef Catchments and the Australian Government working together to improve productivity and ensure the long term sustainability of the cane industry and our natural environment.

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