



CANERISE

Mackay Whitsunday

Encouraging practice change
amongst cane farmers in the
Mackay Whitsunday region

November 2024



Introduction

The Social Deck was contracted by the Great Barrier Reef Foundation (GBRF) to develop a practice change strategy with associated actions to encourage grower engagement and increase access to up-to-date information of [Water Quality programs in the Mackay Whitsunday region](#). The project was funded by The Australian Government through GBRF as part of the Reef Trust Partnership (RTP).

In line with the objectives of the RTP, practice changes are focused on reducing nitrogen, sediment and pesticide loads from Reef catchments in these areas.

The strategy built on existing Queensland government and GBRF-funded research and insights, as well as work already undertaken by RTP-funded delivery providers in the regions, who have been delivering projects 'on the ground' between 2020 and 2024. The specific practice changes promoted in these projects have been built around a substantial body of research on best management practices in cane farming to improve water quality.

The practice change strategy identified a range of factors to increase regional participation in Reef-funded programs including key influences on practice change such as grower capability, motivation, and opportunities for change, along with opportunities to increase community engagement to support positive recognition of cane farmers.

A key outcome identified through the process was the need to increase access to relevant and local information and promote positive stories of local growers.

The centrepiece of the strategy is a web platform, [CaneRise](#), which is a springboard to centralise industry and regional information, promote key messages, funding opportunities, and engage and connect farmers in a positive way to actions that improve water quality.



CANERISE
Mackay Whitsunday



Australian Government



Great Barrier
Reef Foundation

CaneRise Mackay Whitsunday



The CaneRise platform encourages cane growers in the Mackay Whitsunday region to make positive changes in their farming practices that contribute to improving water quality in the catchment area.

It provides a digital 'one-stop-shop' for growers to easily access information, practical tools and resources, funding opportunities, local events, and stories from other Mackay Whitsunday growers who are successfully implementing changes. CaneRise promotes increased awareness and knowledge, support for practice changes, and positive recognition of farmers, while positioning sustainable practices as a social norm within the community.

The CaneRise concept was developed by The Social Deck in collaboration with government and local industry stakeholders in the region. However, its purpose is to bring together opportunities for farmers in one place that is independent from industry or government interests, while encouraging grower engagement in the water quality initiatives available in the region.

The content of CaneRise is carefully curated to be accessible and relevant for growers in the region, and the look and feel has been designed to be bright, inclusive and

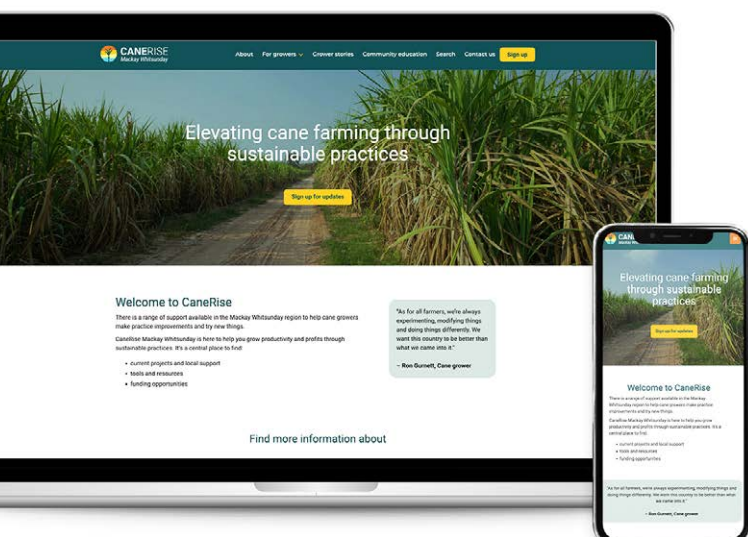
friendly. Key messages are built around sharing the voices of cane farmers and local representatives and avoiding polarising messages of blame. Instead, there is a focus on community stewardship and celebrating positive impact.

CaneRise content is supported by outreach via a bi-monthly newsletter, letting growers know about new updates and opportunities in the region that are hosted on the platform. This is supported by promotion from industry stakeholders and supporters through social media, and some promotion through local mainstream and industry media.

This collaborative and local approach boosts the platform's reach, fosters trust, and strengthens CaneRise's integration with other local initiatives supporting practice change 'on the ground'. It attracts and engages growers as a credible and accessible resource that can support lasting improvements in water quality management.

The platform was launched in June 2023 and has a significant amount of content which is regularly updated with grower stories, tools and resources, and local opportunities such as funding and events. It has been well received by local industry and the wider community. Engagement via subscription with local cane growers continues to grow steadily

The intent of CaneRise is to sustain the platform over time as an effective catalyst to educate, inspire and drive positive actions towards practices that improve water quality in local Reef catchment areas. The long-term vision is that the platform is taken up by community and local industry stakeholders as a key tool to boost and sustain local cane farmer engagement with positive water quality improvement practices into the future.



Behavioural insights basis for CaneRise

The Mackay Whitsunday practice change strategy was developed using a robust analysis of behavioural insights, and application of a number of relevant behavioural models and theories.

Some further information about the development of the strategy is available in the document [Behavioural Insights for Practice Change in Sugarcane: A framework to inform practice change strategies in the Mackay Whitsunday and Lower Burdekin sugarcane regions](#) (available on the GBRF website).



Increased awareness and knowledge

The behavioural analysis identified key barriers to practice change being a lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding of the water quality projects and practices, along with misinformation or misperceptions about the water quality projects and the consequences of implementing practices with improved water quality outcomes (e.g., risks of reduced profits). CaneRise seeks to address this by presenting essential information in engaging and non-judgemental ways about the positive benefits of practice change, using real examples and case studies.

Lower digital literacy amongst some growers in the region, as well as real or perceived lack of time also supported the need for more accessible, easy to digest, bite-sized chunks of information about water quality projects, how to implement specific practices, and the positive consequences of implementing these practices on productivity and profits, as well as environmental protection.



Positive engagement and recognition

There is widespread perception amongst growers and other cane stakeholders in the region that cane growers have been unfairly criticised for poor water quality outcomes, and that efforts to make changes that protect the environment are not acknowledged or recognised.

A key focus of content on CaneRise is using positive narrative, storytelling and case studies to demonstrate and model improved practices to growers and the broader community. These tactics seek to improve attitudes towards water quality improvement and support perceptions that such practices are normative among growers in each region. The recognition motivates growers and fosters a positive community perception of cane growers who are using sustainable practices.



Sustainment of practices through social norms

Growers are more likely to implement and sustain practices with improved water quality outcomes if they are perceived to be common in their region and expected among peers and industry stakeholders. To sustain behaviour, it is important that the perceived social norms are that improving practices are common, achievable and expected in the local area.

For various reasons there are low levels of trust in government-funded and/or branded programs, as well as other external interventions from people outside of the region. This can lead to negative perceptions or misconceptions of adopting practices which improve water quality, due to widespread frustration amongst growers and in the cane industry about negative associations with water quality report cards and regulations.



CaneRise seeks to address this through independence from government branding and language, while bringing together trusted local intermediaries and industry stakeholders with existing relationships, and communicating about improved practices and projects in a cohesive, positive and consistent way. A collaborative and sustained approach to implementing and updating the platform will be critical to maintaining the trust, respect and value of the content encouraging practice change as a social norm in the region.



Reef Catchments



CANELOWERS
Mackay



Sugar Research
Australia



Plane Creek
Productivity Services



Mackay Area
Productivity Services



Farmacist



Liquaforce



Sugar Services
Proserpine



Nutrien Ag Solutions



Catchment
Solutions

Results and achievements



10,000
page views



100
growers
subscribed



3,500
unique site
visitors



67%
open rate

Within its first year, CaneRise has attracted over 10,000 page views from 3,500 unique visitors. The bi-monthly newsletter—covering water quality projects, tools, grower stories, and funding opportunities—reaches a steadily growing subscriber base of over 100 growers and achieves an impressive 67% open rate, reflecting strong interest and engagement from growers in the region.



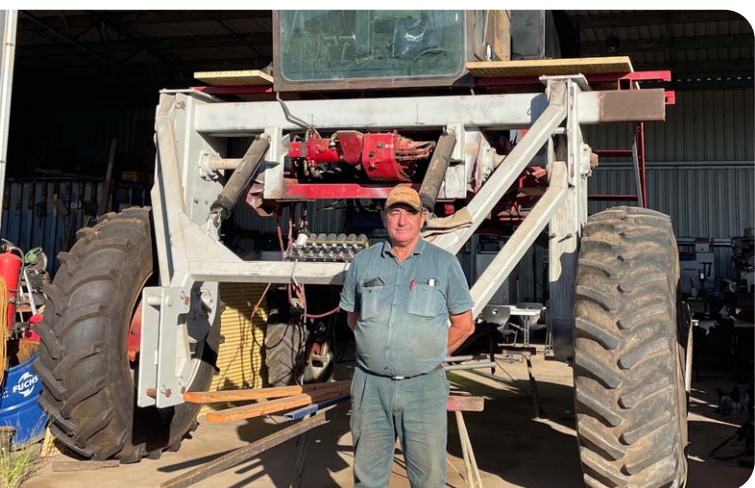
By consolidating valuable resources and success stories, CaneRise will continue to be a valuable resource for growers to support and inspire positive change. The platform's Community Education page and resources also extends its reach to the broader community, including local schools, where teachers can access resources and interactive content on cane farming and sustainable farming practices. This helps to promote the industry and positive changes that are already happening in the broader community.



Surveys and direct community feedback confirm that growers value CaneRise. They report that the platform's resources, funding information, and educational content are especially useful, and the majority of growers indicate they would recommend the site to peers.



Engagement with trusted stakeholders and local organisations has been central to CaneRise's success. A Project Reference Group (PRG) was formed to guide the project implementation in the early stages, comprised of industry organisations delivering services in the Mackay Whitsunday region. Continued collaboration with this group supports content development and promotional efforts, increasing awareness and establishing CaneRise as a respected, community-driven resource.



Recommendations for the future

Feedback from cane farmers and community stakeholders shows that the CaneRise website and its outreach efforts are having positive outcomes. To keep this momentum going, it's essential to continue to update and promote the platform, and for local stakeholders and community members to take on a bigger role in managing and promoting CaneRise in the future.

Key opportunities for the future include:



1. Continuing relevant and engaging content updates

CaneRise should stay dynamic and relevant to the local community. To sustain this, content should be regularly refreshed to reflect the latest resources and tools, funding and project involvement opportunities, and grower stories. Adding interactive features like virtual workshops, community forums, and additional videos could further increase engagement and attract new users in the future.



2. Broaden outreach through direct engagement

Expanding in-person engagement through local events, peer-to-peer learning, and workshops can strengthen CaneRise's connections with growers. Increasing direct, face-to-face interactions would also make CaneRise more accessible for users with varying digital confidence and skills, promoting a more inclusive approach to sustainable practice adoption.



3. Enhance community understanding and perceptions of cane farming

Strengthening the platform's educational resources and engagement with local schools can further embed CaneRise within the community. Expanding the community resources and Learning Hub and further promoting the resources to schools will help foster early understanding of sustainable practices in cane farming, supporting future environmental stewardship and increasing positive community perceptions of the cane industry.



4. Transition to Community-Led Management

For long-term sustainment of change in the region, there should be consideration of transitioning management of the platform to local stakeholders with strong community ties and trust. This would enable the platform to operate with ongoing support, keeping it responsive to the region's unique needs and priorities.



5. Adapt and replicate to other regions

While CaneRise is currently highly tailored to the Mackay Whitsunday region, the model is replicable and could benefit other Reef catchment regions facing similar challenges. By adapting the existing framework and content, CaneRise could promote Reef-friendly practices across Reef catchments in Queensland, driving broader positive impact.

These recommendations highlight the current value of the CaneRise platform and the opportunities to sustain positive change into the future in the Mackay Whitsunday region, as well as a potential replicable model for other regions. With continued investment and strong local engagement, the platform can drive significant, lasting change, reinforcing the link between sustainable practices, productivity benefits and environmental stewardship.