



Great Barrier Reefinance Summary Report

The Great Barrier Reefinance Program was initially designed to identify retiring farmers in the Great Barrier Reef Catchment area. Cultivate Farms sought to match these retiring farmers with aspiring young farmers, working on the proven theory that younger farmers are more adaptable to improved environmental outcomes on farm. As part of this transition, Cultivate Farms sought to educate and assist younger farmers to improve their practices, and in turn the quality of the water runoff from these farms.

The project delivery was an iterative process, as assumptions and expectations proved different in practice, and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social restrictions. Retiring farmers were reluctant to self-identify, and the practice of finding the once-in-a-lifetime moment for aspiring farmers was rare. Taking on board these learnings, Cultivate Farms changed its approach to identify community champions who assisted in uncovering opportunities for farm transition. Through these conversations with community champions, the project was revised to support different types of farm transition. In keeping with the project's priorities, each transition needed to have outcomes that showed improvement in the quality of water runoff.

Key Learnings

Farm enterprises are complex entities. Farm matches can take on many different forms and reflect the intricate nature of the enterprise, land, and stakeholders of the farm. The project did not uncover any simple transition from retiring to aspiring farmers but identified commonalities in all the matches.

Older and retiring farmers can be reluctant to discuss plans for retirement and ageing. Older farmers may have unarticulated interests or notions of transitioning farms, however speaking about their intentions remains taboo, sometimes even within family groups or close friends. Normalising the concept of farm transition and farm matching is critical to the success of this initiative.

Translating farm matches to water quality outcomes is challenging, especially in the short timeframe of the project, as the farm operation transitions take several years. During the project period, the new farmer is less likely to make an impact on farming operations: as the incoming farmer adopts the conventional practices for the first crop after purchase, they often have little funding to implement immediate improvements.

Working with existing farm productivity service groups provided the most effective way of communicating with and gaining the trust of farmers. The existing relationships between farmers and the specialist productivity or agricultural service groups were integral to the farm transitions achieved during this project. Productivity and agricultural service groups have sound and proven methodology for measuring chemical use and land productivity. This underlying scorecard must be utilised to objectively measure the environmental impact of the change in farm ownership and management structure. We recommend incorporating the existing skill levels, relationships and expertise of these service and productivity groups to implement the initiatives further.



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Key Outcomes

Farm Match 1

The Great Barrier Reefinance project assisted one aspiring farmer to start his own farming enterprise in the Ingham area. Reflecting the complex nature of farm transition, this enterprise is made up of paddocks leased from three sources: retiring close family, retiring neighbours, and land owned by Wilmar Sugar Mill. Originally, the farms produced monoculture sugarcane, however the approach from the new farmer managing these farms focuses on improved productivity and soil health through rotational cropping, cover crops and water recycling.

Farm Match 2

Through the Great Barrier Reefinance project and with the assistance of a productivity services commission, this project formalised the generational transition of one farm in the Ingham catchment area. The incoming farmer took management responsibilities and ownership of the family farm he worked on with his father. Recognising the moment in time to formalise the transition was a direct outcome of the project. As part of the transition, and with the support of GBRF, the incoming farmer has discretion to rehabilitate waterways and manage the farm to reduce nutrient runoff. The incoming farmer is working to develop water management and nutrient management plans for the land.

Farm Match 3

In Kilkivan in the Mary catchment area, Cultivate Farms has worked to transition a farm to a syntropic growing system, a method that uses principles from natural systems to combine agriculture and agroforestry. The outgoing farmer was looking to donate the farmland to become a wildlife sanctuary. Through conversations with Cultivate Farms, a plan to farm the land syntropically has been developed and Cultivate Farms is looking for an aspiring farmer to manage the farm. The farming production methods will shift from conventional farming of monoculture beef cattle to syntropic farming. With this approach, large swathes of farmland are revegetated with native trees and plants grown on the river and water courses. Sediment from erosion by cattle is thus reduced through vegetation. The farm has frontage to Wide Bay Creek, a particular focus area for regeneration.

This farm match is atypical, in that ownership of the farm has not transitioned, however the owner will meet their goals of increasing the environmental and biodiversity value of the farm while supporting an aspiring farmer. In this case, the outgoing farmer is both the investor and the retiree. Cultivate Farms will continue to work with this farmer and source an aspiring farmer after the contract period

Farm Match 4

Demonstrating the unconventional nature of how farm transitions are identified, the final farm match is in Lower Wonga in the Mary catchment area. The outgoing farmer sold the property directly to a large hospitality provider in Brisbane, and that provider partnered with Odonata Foundation and Cultivate Farms. Determined to improve farmland sustainability, the hospitality



provider worked with Cultivate Farms to source an aspiring farmer who could introduce regenerative farming practices. The farm had been used as an intensive piggery. Closing the pig farm allowed cattle and carbon farming to be introduced to the property. Wide vegetation buffers have been replanted along the waterways on the property to reduce nitrogen runoff. The cattle are farmed in a crash grazing or rotational grazing manner that allows for higher amounts of native grasses to grow. The high levels of native grasses help with reducing erosion, runoff and sedimentation.

Additional Outcomes

The Great Barrier Reefinance Project was designed to facilitate farm matches and transitions from older to younger farm owners, and in doing so, we envisaged increased productivity of the land and reduced runoff of sediment and nutrients to the Reef.

The project design underestimated the reluctance of farmers to engage in conversations around this topic, which proved a barrier to the success of the original project design. Following an adaptive management approach, the project recalibrated to focus on developing relationships with community leaders and identifying ways to normalise and socialise the concept of ageing, succession planning and alternative options. Cultivate Farms documented learnings in the Ageing on Farm Guide and the Cultivate Communities Guide.

Ageing on Farm Guide

The complex relationship between farmer, family and farm paralysed objective conversations about farm succession plans. Conversations with older farmers revealed they considered only two options for their future: selling up and walking away from a life's work, or working until they dropped. The Ageing on Farm Guide was produced to stimulate a cultural shift toward normalising conversations about farm transitions, and to highlight options that allow retiring farmers to remain on farm, while co-farming or transitioning away from the everyday farm management ([find here](#)).

Cultivate Communities Guide

Recognising that community leaders were instrumental in successfully transitioned farms, we drafted and released the Cultivating Communities Guide ([find here](#)). Further versions of this guide will be available for all community leaders and agricultural specialists to help them identify and address opportunities to rejuvenate their community and local environment.

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