



Nitrogen forum brings water quality scientists and cane farmers together

In a step forward for Great Barrier Reef water quality, scientists and Far North Queensland cane growers will come together to discuss the latest innovations in nitrogen-based fertilizer management to protect both Great Barrier Reef and the sustainability of the sugar cane industry.

Excess nitrogen in water flowing out from the Queensland coast can significantly impact the health resilience of the Great Barrier Reef. Reducing levels of nitrogen in Reef catchment water is a key objective for both water quality scientists and cane farmers, who use nitrogen-based fertilizers to promote the growth of their cane crops.

The inaugural *Innovative Nitrogen Use in Sugarcane* Forum, to be held November 7-8 at the Reef Hotel Casino in Cairns, brings Reef water quality scientists from northern Australia's research organisations together with local growers and industry representatives to debate nitrogen-focused research, with a strong emphasis on collaborative problem solving.

Several research projects under the National Environmental Science Program's Tropical Water Quality Hub – including the flagship 'Project 25' real-time water quality monitoring project – will be presented and discussed at the forum, as will industry projects such as the Six Easy Steps toolbox.

The forum is being co-hosted by sugar industry peak body CANEGROWERS and the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) a non-profit consortium of environmental research organisations and industry representatives based in Cairns.

RRRC managing director Sheriden Morris said that reducing nitrogen runoff was of critical importance to building the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef as it faces ongoing stresses from a changing climate.

"The Great Barrier Reef is facing a wide range of challenges, particularly human-induced climate change, contributing to back-to-black bleaching events in the Reef's northern section.

"Building resilience in the system by improving water quality and sustaining the Reef's natural ecosystems is essential to its future.

“Cane farmers have skin in this game – nitrogen-based fertilizer is a primary operational cost for them and they have equal interest in meeting the technical challenges of growing their crops and sustaining their industry next to the Great Barrier Reef.”

CANEGROWERS Senior Manager for Membership, Engagement and Innovation said that in the last five years, the cane industry has made significant strides in the science and research underpinning practices to improve the effective use of nitrogen in farming.

“Growers and scientists have collaborated on projects, extension and government have partnered on delivery,” he said.

“We have a program to support best management practices called Smartcane BMP, a nutrition framework to collate proven results called Six Easy Steps, a behaviour change program to support change and an extension network to deliver it. All of this supports grower production and reduces impacts on the reef.”

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