



31st October 2019

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By Email: ratt.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir,

RE: Reef Water Quality Senate Inquiry.

Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate Inquiry.

CANEGROWERS Cairns Region Limited represents the cane growing areas of Cairns and its periphery including Babinda and Gordonvale, an area spanning from the Northern Beaches of Cairns to Garradunga and Daradgee in the South. Both the Mulgrave and Russell Rivers are predominant within this landscape along with the many coastal streams and tributaries that flow into the Mulgrave and Russell Catchments.

With specific regard for the terms of reference of this senate Inquiry we seek to only address section f 'any related matters', by providing the Senate Committee with a brief on Project 25 a Grower driven water monitoring project run in a collaborative approach with the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program, Tropical Water Quality Hub.

In 2015 after a meeting with the then Environment Minister, The Hon Greg Hunt on the banks of the Mulgrave River in the Wet Tropics Region of FNQ, Project 25 was born. The Minister's intent was as follows, *"To develop a project with leading farmers, that will result in an express science dialogue to set the standards, to make sure that the measurements are right, to make sure that you are underpinning all of the work of the science between the Hub and the canegrower"*.

The project has now developed beyond that original intention into a Grower driven, strategically placed, real-time monitoring system which, most importantly has the input from the landholder as well as the scientific skill and mentoring of the researchers. It has now evolved into a collaboration between canefarmers, the research community and the banana industry. Growers in this region hold sceptical views regarding the impact of their farming activity on the environment and historically have not trusted the end of catchment water quality information. However, over time a strong trust framework has developed between the scientist and the farmer!

Project 25 now involves water quality monitoring at 11 sites across the Russell-Mulgrave catchment, from ~93,000 hectares of catchment land area, and defining the water quality signature of all major catchment land uses (rainforest, sugarcane, bananas and urban). This includes 5 sites with modern real-time water quality sensor capacity for nitrate and sediment monitoring which can deliver local water quality information to Growers in almost real-time (see figure 1). Part of the collaboration with CSIRO revolves around how to best make this data available and useable for local Growers, and with the social science of how to better engage with primary industry on environmental issues.

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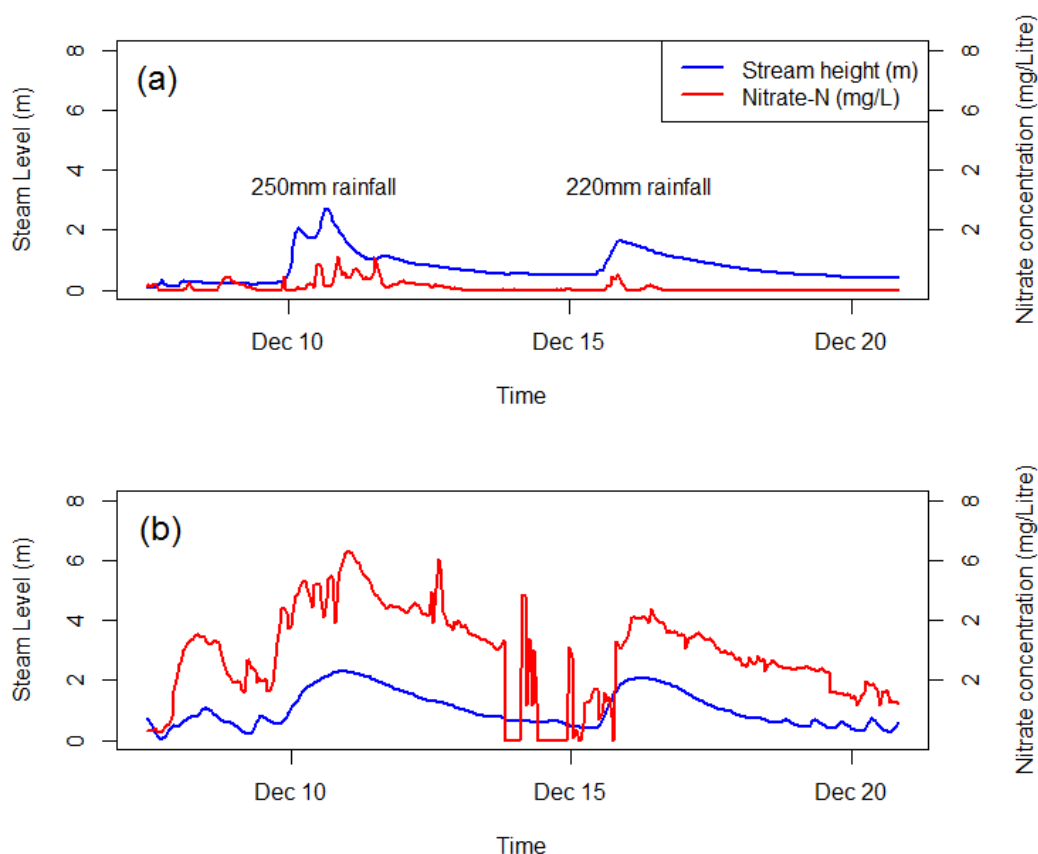


Figure 1. Data example from Project 25 depicting different continuous, real-time nitrate loss dynamics through two monitored sub-catchments in an early wet season event.

The Growers within the project have been analysing the results for several years and identifying any water quality hotspots within their sub-catchment. Results have identified areas where farmers need to do more to manage and improve water quality leaving their farms. Results have also, identified local water quality issues previously attributed to canefarmers that appear more related to other land uses and their impacts on local water quality. Properly attributing water quality issues to the correct cause, with local, evidence-based research, provides Growers with the information needed to address the correct challenges.

As things have progressed, grower engagement has strengthened, acceptance and ownership of the results has been achieved. This in turn has opened the doors to the delivery and acceptance of on ground extension based on water quality outcomes while still maintaining productivity and profitability. Our on-ground extension team has documented farming practices across these sub catchments identifying any gaps in Best Management Practice.

To meet the increased needs of the Growers within these Catchments, CANEGROWERS Cairns Region has employed a full time Environmental and Sustainability Officer. The acceptance of the local data rather than the modelled data, has led to an increase in the BMP accreditation program and the results are clearly reflected in the accredited hectares across the Catchments.

Grower education around the water quality results has been essential in the building of the trust framework between all parties. The land managers are now quite well educated in this respect and understand why a spike in readings may have occurred or more importantly 'how can I better manage my land to reduce this risk'. This education-learning process is a critical aspect of Project 25, and one that takes time and effort to develop and build upon and is a two-way partnership between scientists and farmers.

Project 25 is a relatively simple process, without complications. It's Growers, scientists and extension working together for better water quality outcomes. There is no friction, just an acceptance of working together for the common good. The intent of this submission is to highlight that Growers are more than open to environmental science, but naturally have more trust and faith in science that directly involves them in the design, delivery, analysis and action resulting from the outcomes.

CANEGROWERS Cairns Region have also worked with and fully support the submission by Queensland Cane Growers Organisation Limited. Our vision at CANEGROWERS is to, "ensure a secure and profitable future for cane growers". It is with this vision in mind that we welcome the opportunity to put forward this submission. Canegrowers are not averse to science on catchment water quality and their role in it, but simply request they are meaningfully involved in research that often has significant potential legislative and economic impacts on their livelihoods.

Your Committee would be welcomed on ground to see first- hand should your time permit.

Yours sincerely,

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On Behalf of Project 25

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