BSES Limited

FINAL REPORT - SRDC PROJECT BSS278

SUGAR-INDUSTRY TRAINING ON

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

by

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SD06012

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BSES Limited Publication
SRDC Final Report SD06012 **November 2006**

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CONTENTS

Page No

SUMMARY i

1.0 BACKGROUND 1

2.0 OBJECTIVES 1

3.0 WORKSHOPS 1

4.0 KEY LEARNINGS AND KNOWLEDGE GAINED 2

5.0 BENEFITS TO INDUSTRY 3

6.0 COMMUNICATION OF FINDINGS 3

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS ON TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE GAINED 4

APPENDIX 1 – Media article 5

APPENDIX 2 – Draft article for the *BSES Bulletin* 6

SUMMARY

Two Community Engagement Workshops were run by Coutts J&R for the New South Wales sugar industry. The structure of the workshops recognised that there are different levels of engagement – or participation – by target groups, clients or stakeholders in programs designed for their benefit. Sixteen key industry people attended at least one of the workshops.

The first workshop focused on crisis and issues management. This focused on planning for and developing techniques to handle crises and issues, and how to be proactive rather than reactive. The difference between a crisis and an issue was also discussed, as were the different steps to deal with them.

Participants rated the workshop as quite useful with average rating of 3.9 on a scale of 1-5 (5 = very useful).

The second workshop focussed on how best to use the NSW cogeneration project to raise a more favourable profile with local communities.

The major learnings from the day were in issues and crisis management, the different levels and methods/frameworks of engaging with the community and growers, and the use of and skills involved with focus groups.

1.0 BACKGROUND

Community expectations on the Australian sugar industry have become increasingly important. In the New South Wales (NSW) industry, these expectations have manifested in:

- Concerns over possible impacts the industry has on local rivers and streams;
- Protests against cogeneration of electricity;
- Community annoyance about farming practices such as burning, harvesting, cultivating and spraying.

For its part, the Australian sugar industry does not have a strong record of community engagement. Both the industry and the community would be better served by improving two-way dialogue.

This project sought to make the sugar industry a better neighbour by providing the NSW industry personnel with exposure to community-engagement processes.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Specific objectives of the project were to:

- Identify specific issues where community engagement is needed and commence a community-engagement project on the issue of highest priority;
- Improve dialogue between the sugar industry and the wider community and build trust;
- Act as a pilot for further training in community engagement in the industry.

Training at two workshops provided NSW sugar-industry personnel with exposure to the community-engagement processes.

3.0 WORKSHOPS

Two Community Engagement Workshops were run by Coutts J&R for the NSW sugar industry. The structure of the workshops recognised that there are different levels of engagement – or participation – by target groups, clients or stakeholders in programs designed for their benefit.

The first workshop (21 February 2007) focused on crisis and issues management. The session focused on planning for and developing techniques to handle crises and issues, and how to be proactive rather than reactive. The difference between a crisis and an issue was also discussed, as were the different steps to deal with them.

The second workshop (15 May 2007) focussed on how best to use the NSW cogeneration project to raise a more favourable profile with local communities.

Sixteen key industry people attended at least one of the workshops. This included farmers and staff from the NSW Canegrowers Association, mill directors, mill management, and BSES and CPPB staff, plus one representative from local government.

4.0 KEY LEARNINGS AND KNOWLEDGE GAINED

The major learnings from the workshops were in issues and crisis management, the different levels and methods/frameworks of engaging with the community and growers, and the use of and skills involved with focus groups.

Ways in which participants indicated that they intended to apply their learnings from the first workshop included improving communications, drawing up strategies to handle issue or crisis management, and developing methods to engage the community about various issues (environmental, water quality). The full list of how participants thought that the learnings will be applied is:

- Foster relations with local journalists in order to get some good news stories printed;
- Discuss environmental issues with the community;
- Develop a range of methods to engage community on water quality issues on the floodplain;
- Deal with grower and harvesting groups in relation to changes in harvesting methods;
- Draw up strategies to handle issue or crisis management and apply this to any issue or crisis that may occur in my area;
- Encourage change in the way industry uses media;
- Use crisis management good checklist;
- Encourage farmers to be even more focussed with involvement outside the industry;
- Send newsletters to growers;
- Revamp newsletters to growers and communication with elected grower representatives;
- Try some fresh approaches with communication;
- Create a web page for local canegrowers office.

Participants rated the workshop as quite useful with average rating of 3.9 on a scale of 1-5 (5 = very useful).

The second workshop focussed on how best to use the cogeneration project to raise a more favourable profile with local communities. Ideas for ‘good news’ media releases were identified and prioritised. These included (priority in brackets):

- Half the Tweed Shire supplied with renewable green power - 33% of the Lismore and Richmond Valley shires (7);
- NSW sugar industry value adding with a sustainable renewable resource (1);
- 200 new jobs with two new cogeneration plants (5);
- $160+ million investment in Northern Rivers regional area (5);
- The end of cane fires (5);
- Green power to community from a major reduction in cane fires;
- Greenhouse gas reduction by the equivalent of 40,000 cars (4);

- Condong mill emissions down by 95% (2);
- Improved safety in factory;
- Less dust and noise pollution from harvester and transport;
- Environmentally beneficial way of disposing of sawmill waste;
- Keeps 1,000+ people in jobs;
- Cogeneration allows farmers to care for land better and/or better environmental farm practices - 35,000 ha of sensitive floodplain and waterways (1).

The group then prepared draft stories from these ideas.

Another group exercise required participants put on their 'knocker' hat and 'pick holes' in the cogeneration project. In the final exercise, the group identified facts that could be used to refute these criticisms. As part of this workshop, tips were also given how to help media releases reach the news, notes on photography, and how to deal with journalists.

5.0 BENEFITS TO INDUSTRY

Fostering better relations with local communities and informing them of the social, economic and environmental benefits of the sugar industry will help ensure a future for the NSW sugar industry. As a result of past experiences with local media and community groups, there has been reluctance to engage with them. The skills and knowledge gained through this training should increase the industry's confidence in dealing with both the community and the media.

The issues identified at the workshops and the draft media articles will be very useful to the person appointed the new senior public-relations position within the NSW Sugar Milling Co-operative.

Actions that workshop attendees planned to undertake were:
1. Establish a part-time public-relations position for the NSW industry;
2. Develop a risk management plan for CTH (harvesting group);
3. Produce good news articles for local media;
4. Notify service clubs, etc, that we are available as guest speakers;
5. Organise bus trips for community members to cane fires;
6. Identify issues to use topics for Cane Check groups;
7. Adopt a fresh approach to circulars and mailouts.

6.0 COMMUNICATION OF FINDINGS

One article on community benefits from the sugar-industry restructure funding is included in Appendix 1. Other articles are in preparation. Further communications will be made by the new public-relations person.

Peter McGuire also drafted an article about the project for the *BSES Bulletin* (Appendix 2).

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS ON TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE GAINED

1. The Australian sugar industry needs to be more proactive in promoting ‘good news’ stories.

2. Industry organisations should engage freelance journalists with access to major regional and capital city newspapers. Facilitated workshops should be used to identify suitable articles.

This report will be sent to all BSES Area Development Managers and Extension Officers.

APPENDIX 1 – Media article

To Tweed Daily News, Northern Star

For immediate release

Restructure money has community benefits

There will be some benefits to Tweed residents from the federal government's sugar industry restructure package. Up to $2.3M from the restructure package will be used by the sugar industry to install some new cane pads and extend some existing pads. These pads are used as pick up points for collecting cane to transport to the mill. According to John Tait, Cane Supply Superintendent at Condong Mill, this will provide an opportunity to relocate one or two pads away from residential areas.

John Tait explains how the sugar industry plant to relocate some pads to improve transport efficiency.

Mr Tait said that moving pads that are close to houses where noise is sometimes a problem will be a consideration. Before a pad can be relocated a suitable alternative site would need to be identified. He said this was usually the most difficult part. The long term aim is to have pads in locations that minimise field and road haulage as well as minimising any impact on residents.

Choosing the best locations for cane pads has been a complicated process. Scientists from CSIRO have helped the NSW Sugar Milling Cooperative choose the most effective places to locate the cane pads. The CSIRO recommended sites that will minimise cane haulage on public roads. This will save fuel and time while minimising effects on the local community. The impact of noise and dust on local residents will also be considered when choosing new cane pad sites.

ENDS

APPENDIX 2 – Draft article for the *BSES Bulletin*

Community Engagement Training for NSW Industry

Peter McGuire

While the sugar industry has good internal communications, we are often not so good at communicating with local communities. The industry has lots of good news stories that rarely get a run and we are sometime at a loss on how best to reply to some complaints against the industry. To help improve this situation, BSES organised two SRDC-sponsored workshops for the NSW sugar industry.

At the workshops, Dr Jeff Coutts provided some practical insights into how to work better with the media and local communities. Jeff showed us the best way to answer the 'knockers' is to anticipate potential criticisms and then identify facts to refute these criticisms. Whether an activity is good or bad is always arguable, but facts are more difficult to disagree about.

Caption: This cogeneration plant at Condong Mill is one of two plants under construction in NSW.

During the workshops, we also realised that local communities were only partly aware of the NSW Sugar Industry's current major project – two new electricity cogeneration plants. We need to better promote the good news stories about the benefits that this project is bringing to the Northern Rivers area:

- Half the Tweed Shire and one-third of the Lismore and Richmond Valley Shires will be supplied with renewable green power;
- There will be a major reduction in cane firing;
- Greenhouse gas reduction from the project is equivalent to taking 40,000 cars off the road permanently;

- Diversification by the industry will help keep over 1,000 people in jobs.

Engaging with local communities is just one of the many things the industry needs to do in order to remain sustainable in the long term. The workshops demonstrated 'time effective' ways of getting the community onside with sugar industry activities and covered key techniques for engaging with the wider community. Participants agreed that the workshops were a very useful exercise and said we need to spend more time keeping the community informed.

SRDC's support for this project is gratefully acknowledged.