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Targeted Planning for Profit: A grass roots program to build grower skills to manage change and implement integrated future planning: milestone 5 & final report CG008

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"Targeted Planning for Profit"
A Grass Roots Program to Build Grower Skills
to Manage Change and Implement Integrated
Future Planning

Milestone 5 & Final Report
CG008

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1. Executive Summary:

The Australian Sugar Industry has been grappling with fluctuating sugar prices, poor seasonal conditions and flagging productivity for some time now. The Isis sugar industry in the state’s south has not been immune to these challenges. In 2003 the Isis industry as a whole recognised the difficulties the industry was facing and the need to develop a planned strategy to assist the industry to adapt, survive and prosper in a changing farming environment. A partnership between the region’s sugar mill, CANEGROWERS body and Productivity Services Company resulted in the formalisation of the ‘Isis Sugar Partnership’, from which was born the Isis Target 100 Productivity Initiative.

In 2004/05 Isis Target 100 recognised that tackling productivity issues alone would not generate the type of change required for growers to adapt to the sugar industry’s broader challenges. Isis Target 100 felt that a dedicated project was required to tackle some of the key weaknesses within the industry - fear of change, poor ability to learn from mistakes, under-utilisation of resources, lifestyle choices before profit and lack of future planning.

A coordinated program known as ‘Targeted Planning for Profit’ was developed in an endeavour to begin building grower capacity to accept and adapt to change and to develop stronger business acumen amongst the region’s growers. Funding was successfully received from SRDC, allowing the project to be implemented through a series of grower discussion groups that focused on allowing growers to absorb new information at a comfortable pace, challenging grower mindsets in a safe environment and only presenting new information to growers once the necessary foundation information had been provided. This approach was developed in close consultation with a pilot group of growers and the Isis Target 100 team to ensure it was industry relevant.

The Targeted Planning for Profit project has proactively helped build the capacity of growers in the Isis supply area to adapt more successfully to change and develop stronger business acumen. The region has excellent rates of adoption of change and implementation of new technology; particularly in areas such as legume production, minimum tillage, GPS farming and utilisation of the FEAT (Farm Economic Analysis Tool) program.

However, the most striking example of the region’s more positive and proactive attitude to change was seen during the discovery of Smut Disease in the region in June 2006 and the subsequent industry changes. Isis growers and industry bodies proactively responded to the Smut incursion and immediately implemented a plan to reduce the impact of Smut as quickly as possible, even if that meant accepting significant production and income losses in the first few years. This plan has been well accepted amongst the grower community and growers are proactively developing new approaches to their farm planning in order to tackle the incursion and minimise its impact.

In addition, Isis growers have recognised the wisdom of using planning tools to make these major adjustments to their farming businesses as well as seeking sound advice on their proposed plans. Many growers have used the FEAT program to assess the potential financial impact of the changes they are considering.
Targeted Planning for Profit demonstrates that information that challenges a grower’s behaviour or beliefs must be presented in an appropriate manner in order to be well received by growers. The presenters used in this project had excellent communication skills and a strong understanding of the grower community, and thus were able to present material that was often confronting to the grower in a safe and non-threatening manner. The response of growers to this information was extremely encouraging and reinforced to all involved that avoiding difficult topics can often be counter-productive.

In addition, this project demonstrated that grower-friendly tools that can help growers assess their business performance, or the likely impact of a practice change, offer great value to the sugar industry. Grower experience with computers will still have a major impact on the level of uptake and use of tools such as FEAT, however, the availability of local support can make all the difference to the uptake and successful application of FEAT to growers’ businesses.

For a strong and successful sugar industry, we must take advantage of all the support, resources and tools available to help growers develop their capacity to prosper into the future.
2. Project Background:

Production losses in the sugar industry are often attributed to agronomic pressures such as drought or disease; however it is the belief of Isis Target 100 that a far stronger driving force behind productivity issues is grower attitude and skills. Progressive growers regularly consult with industry advisors, attend industry workshops and keep abreast of industry innovations. However, in terms of the innovation cycle, the majority of growers fall into the 'laggard' stage - slow to adopt changes.

Given the current crisis the industry is facing, there is a strong need for an industry led mentoring program that addresses key weaknesses within the industry - fear of change, poor ability to learn from mistakes, under-utilisation of resources, lifestyle choices before profit and lack of future planning.

Sharing new skills with growers (e.g. business planning) before they have the capacity to adapt to change often results in very poor implementation of new skills. Building grower capacity to adapt to change and use action learning principles will allow for more effective uptake of new business skills that support future planning, goal setting and continuous improvement.

Women in the sugar industry are still only involved to a limited degree but offer the potential to add greater value to the industry. Ideally, a stronger female contribution to business decisions will offer growers an opportunity to really think through their farm decisions and ultimately, achieve better financial and productivity outcomes.
3. **Project Objectives:**

This project aimed to improve the economic, social and environmental performance of 70 cane farming businesses in the Isis cane supply area by building the capacity of growers, and their families, to cope with and adapt to change and by fostering their ability to implement improved business planning and management skills.

The objectives of the project are to demonstrate improved capacity of growers to:

1. Have confidence and capacity to accept change and adapt to change
2. Implement action learning and continuous improvement processes
3. Implement whole-of-farm planning and goal setting processes
4. Use business performance monitoring processes to improve decision-making processes
5. Utilise existing human resources (such as women, children, business advisors, industry extension services etc) to improve decision-making processes
6. Develop business acumen in financial monitoring and planning

This project has definitely helped build the capacity of growers in the Isis supply area to adapt successfully to change and develop stronger business acumen. The region has excellent rates of adoption of change and new technology; often the highest in the state. FutureCane data on the uptake of new technology throughout the various regions in the state has consistently shown Isis as having one of the best uptake rates of new farming practices such as legume production, minimum tillage, GPS farming and utilisation of the FEAT (Farm Economic Analysis Tool) program.

Perhaps the greatest outcome of this project has been the general attitude of growers to change. While this project was not designed to reach all growers, the flow on effect of the improved knowledge and attitude of those growers who had been involved to growers who weren’t involved has been regularly seen throughout the region. The most striking recent example of the region’s more positive and proactive attitude to change was seen during the discovery of Smut Disease in the region in June 2006 and the subsequent industry changes (please see “Outputs” section for more detail).

### 3.1 Smut Response Demonstrates Project Effectiveness

Isis growers and industry bodies proactively responded to the Smut incursion and immediately implemented a plan to reduce the impact of Smut as quickly as possible, even if that meant accepting significant production and income losses in the first few years. The region’s growers almost universally acknowledged the wisdom of removing susceptible varieties as quickly as possible and immediately adapted their spring planting program for August/September 2006 and autumn (February/March) 2007 to include only resistant or intermediate varieties.

While other regions strongly resisted DPI&F and BSES advice to ban the planting of susceptible varieties, Isis actively campaigned DPI&F to remove the susceptible varieties as a result of the region’s strong ability to accept and adapt to change. In addition, Isis heartily embraced the industry program to bring Smut resistant varieties from North Queensland and eagerly planted these varieties on all farms throughout the district in Spring 2006 even though there was virtually no industry data on the potential performance
of the three varieties in the region. Conversely, other regions were less proactive in the planting of these varieties and as a consequence, have had major difficulties encouraging the use of these varieties in following planting seasons. Isis, on the other hand, has readily embraced these varieties to the extent that the three North Queensland varieties dominated the Spring 2007 planting season.

Implementation of whole-of-farm planning and the use of business planning skills in the Isis region have again been demonstrated through the Smut incursion. The discovery of Smut has resulted in growers having to seriously re-think their plough-out and planting program for the next few years and make some hard decisions about ploughing out well performing susceptible varieties. Isis growers have recognised the wisdom of using planning tools to make these major adjustments to their farming businesses as well as seeking sound advice on their proposed plans. Local extension resources (BSES Extension Officer and Isis Productivity Ltd Supervisor) have been so well utilised in many growers’ planning processes that a simple, excel-based planting and plough-out planning tool has been developed by BSES Extension Officer Jim Sullivan, to cater to the demand. In addition, many growers have then used the FEAT program to assess the potential financial impact of the changes they are considering. This is a never before seen occurrence in the history of the sugar industry.

3.2  **Isis Endorses Profitability as well as Productivity**

The general acknowledgement in the Isis region of the importance of profitability as well as productivity has been one of the most obvious outcomes of this project. There is a general acceptance amongst the grower community of the consideration of the financial impacts of farming practices and the need to actually know if a particular crop or activity is viable. A recent Isis industry event to open a new facility at the Isis Central Sugar Mill saw every industry speaker repeatedly mention the worlds ‘viable agribusiness’ in relation to Isis cane farms. Prior to the commencement of this project, such language was virtually never heard.
4. **Methodology:**

The Methodology was based on a step by step program aimed at:-

1. Allowing growers to absorb the new information at a comfortable pace
2. Challenging their mindsets/paradigms over time and
3. Adding new information only once the necessary foundation information has been provided

The preliminary methodology aimed to use five ‘phases’ to implement the project:-

*Phase One – ‘**Building the Foundation**’: DPI&F Building Rural Leaders (BRL) team delivers specialised, interactive, grower-friendly workshop on change & action learning.*

*Phase Two – ‘**Strengthening the Foundation**’: BRL delivers workshop on goal setting and continuous improvement to same participants.*

*Phase Three – ‘**Mentoring New Tools**’: FutureCane team delivers 2 workshops on business planning & performance monitoring to same participants. Workshops introduce tools/models developed for examining farm & business performance. Principles learnt in Phase 1 & 2 incorporated in Phase 3 workshops & tools.*

*Phase Four – ‘**Implementing New Tools**’: Existing industry advisors mentor growers (and their wives) to use tools/models for examining farm and business performance.*

*Phase Five – ‘**Measure, Monitor, Evaluate**’: Industry advisors mentor growers to use tools for regular performance monitoring and continuous improvement.*

All phases were linked to industry farm walks/case studies etc centred on the core aims of the program. That is, the general principles of this project (to build grower capacity etc) were woven into all Isis Target 100 events so that growers not directly involved in the project were still exposed to the concepts of change, building business acumen and so on.

4.1 **Pivotal Role of Pilot Group to Project Methodology**

Paramount to the methodology of Targeted Planning for Profit was inclusion of grower thoughts and ideas in the development phase of the project. To this end, a ‘pilot group’ of growers was developed to provide vital input into the general approach of the project activities.

Pilot group growers were chosen to hopefully represent each major ‘sector’ of the grower community. Thus the group included a ‘young grower’ (age 30), a ‘middle age’ grower (age 41) and an ‘older grower’ (age 63). In addition, each grower differed in his level of education, approach to risk, business planning skills and adoption rate of new farming practices. A pilot workshop aiming at covering the topics of Phase One and Two was delivered to this pilot group and the members of the Isis Target 100 team.
Some key feedback items from this pilot, which resulted in significant changes to the delivery method, are outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>GROWER FEEDBACK</th>
<th>PROJECT RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of the Targeted Planning for Profit BRL-based activity</td>
<td>Strong feedback that growers are “workshopped out” and are put off by the word ‘workshop’. Felt ‘discussion group’ may be more inviting. Felt a name that reflected the content a bit more and a focus on ‘change’ and the ‘future’ may be more relevant.</td>
<td>Final Title:– “A Changing Future in Sugar” Discussion Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time allocated to the Targeted Planning for Profit BRL-based activity</td>
<td>Covering the Phase 1 and 2 topics (change/action learning/goal setting/continuous improvement) in 2 full day sessions was felt to be too daunting for many growers; too much time away from their businesses and didn’t allow growers time to ‘digest’ the information and ask further questions. Some content could be condensed to make the sessions more succinct and less time consuming, allowing Phase 1 &amp; 2 workshops to be delivered as a ‘package’. Suggested we incorporate ‘goal setting’ topic into FutureCane-based activities.</td>
<td>New format:- 2 half days (delivered on consecutive days); finishing with late lunch so growers can take a sandwich and go if necessary. Having the half a day gap between each session allows growers time to ‘digest’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Size &amp; Dynamics</td>
<td>It was felt that group size should be kept relatively small so growers felt comfortable to contribute. Also important to try and have a mix of good, average and poor growers at each discussion group to encourage diversity.</td>
<td>Group size to be limited to 10 -12 growers. Growers to be individually approached for each discussion group (rather than a mass mail out) to enable a diverse mix of growers.</td>
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While the original project proposal aimed at delivering modified modules from BRL in two separate workshops (Phase 1 and Phase 2), extensive consultation with the pilot group and other interested growers identified that Phase 1 and 2 could be merged to allow a more seamless delivery of ‘change’ related topics and the goal setting topic woven into Phase 3. However, it should be noted that growers were offered the opportunity to have the BRL team deliver ‘one-off’ follow-up sessions on particular topics if they wanted more detail.

Similar feedback was received from the pilot group on the pilot workshops for Phase 3. It was strongly felt by the growers that we would lose participants if the FutureCane based business planning & performance monitoring information was delivered as two workshops.
The FutureCane team had already been developing a simpler, more powerful delivery method for this information and were happy to use the pilot group to ‘test’ out their new ideas. Some content was removed or included as background reading material to save time. The pilot group’s response to the revised workshop was extremely positive and it was decided to deliver this new workshop as part of the project. In addition, the pilot group’s response to the improved version of the FEAT program was very encouraging, even from the 63-year-old grower who had never used a computer before.

4.2 Mentoring Service Methodology

The Targeted Planning for Profit mentoring service commenced in late 2005 with growers in the pilot group and other growers who expressed a need for one-on-one assistance with their business planning activities. As a result, over 10 growers were involved in the pilot of the mentoring service, which led to more diverse and useful feedback from a broad range of growers.

The mentoring service was delivered through a range of methods including one-on-one with the grower, one-on-one with the grower and his wife/son, two mentors with the grower (and/or his wife/son) and two mentors with a small group of growers.

This activity emphasised the importance of mentoring to ensure the Targeted Planning for Profit tools are properly understood and actually used after the mentor(s) leaves the farm. By ‘breaking the ice’ so to speak with the mentor, the grower becomes more comfortable with the tool, especially the FEAT tool which is computer based.

Follow up visits from mentors greatly help to ensure that tool becomes a part of the grower’s decision-making process.

4.3 Project Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation of Targeted Planning for Profit occurred through a number of methods as outlined below:

- Baseline evaluation techniques were designed to assess grower attitudes or capacity to coping with changes, feelings/emotions about the future and farm/business practices prior to the commencement of the project.

- The delivery of the pilot program was heavily evaluated to fine-tune the activities for the final program. Focus group discussions were held to assess current attitudes/emotions/practices when the pilot workshop commenced, during the pilot series and on completion of the pilot in order to evaluate the pilot and make appropriate changes to the delivery itself.

- Once the finalised program commenced, participant attitudes, emotions and approach to farm practices were measured prior to the start of each series of workshops through the use of a combination of a brief grower survey to measure common language and photo language/dartboard activities to gauge grower emotions.
At the start of each series of mentoring activities current grower practices were measured through a brief survey and recorded observation by the mentor.

Grower participation numbers were measured via attendance sheets.

At the end of each workshop the impact of the workshop was evaluated to measure any changes in attitudes/emotions (this information was also continually used to influence changes in the delivery of future workshops). The accumulation of this data was used to assess the impact of the entire program. Structured interviews with several randomly selected participants was planned to gauge more in-depth feedback/outcomes but after the surprisingly open and honest feedback received during the project it was felt this process was unnecessary.
5. Outputs:

5.1 Grower capacity developed through delivery of workshops

Grower capacity has been developed through the delivery of a series of workshops (referred to as “Discussion Groups”) commencing with Workshop One, which addressed topics relating to change management, and followed by Workshop Two, a more practical workshop focused on building grower skills in assessing the financial impact of change and business viability.

During the life of the project, Smut disease was discovered in the Isis region and the sugar price improved significantly. These two events had a major impact on the attitudes of local growers so the focus of Workshop One was amended to better address the new needs of the growers in relation to coping with change and making good decisions for the future (two flyer versions are shown below).

A similar flyer was used to promote Workshop Two, titled “Future Options” Discussion Group.
Workshop One Flyer “A Changing Future for Sugar”

Do you want to ....

✓ take best advantage of the sugar price jump?
✓ know why Isis is being hailed as one of the most progressive regions in the state?
✓ succeed in a changing rural environment?

If yes, get involved with Targeted Planning for Profit, an initiative centred around improving grower profitability through............

- One-on-one assistance
- Tailored grower-relevant discussion groups
- Future focused planning tools

Upcoming Discussion Group

What: A Changing Future for Sugar
When: Part A: Thurs 23 February 7.30 am – Lunch
      Part B: Fri 24 February 7.30 am – Lunch
Info? Judy Skilton 0407 114 748

NB:- Discussion is optional; say as little/as much as you like!!

Our aim? To fine-tune your farming operation in order to improve your bottom line & your future in sugar.
The “Changing Future for Sugar” workshops focused on building grower capacity to recognise change, adapt to change, challenge their own paradigms regarding change and the future, consider the value of action learning to their businesses and address what challenges in their life they can influence and what they can’t.

Feedback from these workshops was generally very positive; in fact, on two occasions growers who had come alone decided to bring their wives on the second day because it was so valuable! While growers openly acknowledged the content challenged their comfort zones and existing belief systems, they also recognised the value of doing so which is reflected in some of the feedback summarised below:-

“*The workshop was confidence building for me and proved it’s necessary to think about these things*”

“*It helped me see that different people think differently and that thinking differently is ok*”
“I see now that two people can develop two different ‘sets of rules’ (i.e. paradigms) on the same topic”

“Putting a lot of energy into things I can’t change (e.g. sugar price) is pointless; I’m better off focussing on things I can influence”

“The workshop was helpful in not only realising and accepting change but also assessing chosen and unchosen changes”

“The relaxed style of the workshop was very welcoming; makes it easier to participate without feeling uncomfortable – it promotes action – I would encourage others to attend”

The types of skills learnt at the workshop have led to an increased capacity of Isis growers to implement action learning/continuous improvement processes as demonstrated below:

- Implementing new farming systems has its own set of teething problems; many of the growers who've attended the Targeted Planning for Profit workshops are in the process of implementing new systems and its been refreshing to see growers informally making their own assessments of what went well, what went wrong and then making changes accordingly. They're not only assessing the failures or challenges but also taking note of the successes and taking steps to repeat those successes whilst minimising any
future challenges/obstacles (continuous improvement process). In the past, growers were more prone to decide a particular practice was not worth trying again if it failed on their first attempt.

- Examples of this informal continuous improvement process include:
  - Soybeans - growers are reflecting on the previous season and assessing where they could improve and then making plans to improve for the following crop.
  - Weed control in cane – many growers are recognising that their weed control has been less than ideal in some cases and investigating other options, better timing, improving spraying equipment etc to get better results in the future.
  - Minimum tillage – many growers have experimented with minimum tillage with varying success. These growers have avoided the temptation of ‘giving up’ on the practise and instead are experimenting with new ideas based on the learnings from their previous attempts.
  - GPS/Precision farming – growers have also been learning to use GPS and precision farming practices in more innovative ways in their businesses to help making their farms more efficient.

More examples of the attitude changes of the broader Isis grower community are outlined in the “Objectives” section above.
5.3 Future Options Workshops

The “Future Options” workshops were focused on building grower capacity to use an industry specific management tool (FEAT – see below) to better assess the financial performance of their business and to showcase how this tool can be used to assess potential on-farm changes.

**FEAT – Farm Economic Analysis Tool**

FutureCane has developed a Farm Economic Analysis Tool, FEAT, designed specifically for the cane industry using grower experiences and feedback.

The main purpose of FEAT is to compare the profitability of different farming systems, which it does by calculating gross margins of a grower’s cane and complementary crops, ultimately showing a grower’s return on investment.

Some popular features include the program’s ability to identify the optimum number of ratoons to maximise profitability and to accurately calculate machinery operation costs.

FEAT can make accurate comparisons because of the details it uses, e.g. individual fertiliser and chemical rates and costs. Machinery costs are unique to each grower using tractor size, fuel consumption, implement speed, width, efficiency and repairs and maintenance. Accurate tillage costs become especially important when growers are considering changes to tillage practices and for establishing contracting rates.

FEAT has been used in many innovative ways, from on-farm decision making used by a single grower, to industry groups discussing the costs and benefits of new farming systems at large field days.

Growers have found FEAT a useful and easy-to-use tool. They have commented that it is user friendly, relevant to what is happening on the farm and by seeing changes happen in front of them, they find it very useful for planning.

The FEAT workshops wove the theme of change (first addressed in the ‘Changing Future for Sugar’ workshop) into the discussions and case studies on how to use FEAT in farming businesses. This was a very effective technique that reinforced the importance of using a clear process for assessing and implementing change.
Local advocate of FEAT, Isis grower Geoff McCarthy, presents a case study on how FEAT has been successfully applied to his business at the Launch of Targeted Planning for Profit in 2005.

Feedback from these workshops was extremely positive largely because FEAT is a hands-on, 'practical' tool; as compared to the first workshop, which discussed their own personal thoughts and belief systems and thus was more challenging. While growers are not generally adept at making financial assessments of their businesses the current sugar industry environment of price fluctuations, Smut disease incursion and rising input costs made the topic of profitability very relevant.
Growers were impressed with the ‘user-friendly’ nature of FEAT, although some were hesitant about using a computer; see their feedback summarised below:

“I LOVED the machinery sheet in the FEAT model; it is so practical and useful to my business and finally puts a real cost to farming operations I’ve always wondered about”

“I didn’t realise how easy to use it would be; it took away my concerns about using a computer-based tool”

“It was great to have a ‘hands-on’ session with the program; I was expecting a lot of theory but we started actually using FEAT very quickly”

“The examples used were very relevant to my business – I am currently implementing (or thinking of implementing) several of the ideas you used in the case studies”

“More growers should be using this tool on their own business – we don’t talk about the profit side of farming often enough”
5.4 Demonstrated capacity of Isis growers to implement whole-of-farm planning and goal setting processes

Whole of farm planning and goal setting has been well implemented in the Isis region in recent times. It would be fair to say the smut incursion has ‘fast tracked’ this process of adoption of whole of farm planning into grower business philosophy; fortunately, Targeted Planning for Profit had already successfully laid the foundations of planning and goal setting amongst the growers.

The discovery of Smut has resulted in growers having to seriously re-think their plough-out and planting program for the next few years and make some hard decisions about ploughing out well performing susceptible varieties. Isis growers have recognised the wisdom of using planning tools to make these major adjustments to their farming businesses as well as seeking sound advice on their proposed plans. Local extension resources (BSES Extension Officer and Isis Productivity Ltd Supervisor) have been so well utilised in many growers’ planning processes that a simple, excel-based planting and plough-out planning tool has been developed by BSES Extension Officer, Jim Sullivan, to cater to the demand. In addition, many growers have then used the FEAT program to assess the potential financial impact of the changes they are considering. This is a never before seen occurrence in the history of the sugar industry.

Isis growers and industry bodies proactively responded to the Smut incursion and immediately implemented a plan to reduce the impact of Smut as quickly as possible, even if that meant accepting significant production and income losses in the first few years. The growers almost universally acknowledged the wisdom of removing susceptible varieties as quickly as possible and immediately adapted their spring planting program for August/September 2006 and Autumn (February/March) 2007 to include only resistant or intermediate varieties. While other regions strongly resisted DPI&F and BSES advice to ban the planting of susceptible varieties, Isis actively campaigned DPI&F to remove the susceptible varieties as a result of the region’s strong ability to accept and adapt to change.

In addition, Isis heartily embraced the industry program to bring Smut resistant varieties from North Queensland and eagerly planted these varieties on every farm in the district in Spring 2006 even though there was virtually no industry data on the potential performance of the three varieties in the region.
Isis growers wholestick planting Smut resistant cane from North Queensland during Spring Planting season 2006.

Conversely, other regions resisted the planting of these varieties and as a consequence, have had major difficulties encouraging the use of these varieties in following planting seasons. Isis on the other hand has readily embraced these varieties to the extent that the three North Queensland varieties dominated the Spring 2007 planting season.
5.5 Demonstrated capacity of Isis growers to implement business performance monitoring processes

The FEAT program has been well received amongst Isis growers. While discussions about economics and approaching cane farming as a business enterprise still challenges many growers there is now a general acceptance that these things are important and should be considered.

Many workshop attendees now use FEAT at home (to varying degrees) and it has been extremely pleasing to see growers who haven’t even attend the workshop request a copy of the FEAT program to use at home based on the feedback they’ve heard from their fellow growers.

Several growers have used it to fully analyse their entire farm business, however, in general, FEAT is more likely to be used in ‘parts’ – for example, the machinery sheet is extremely popular for putting a real cost to particular farming operations such as cultivation.

Some growers will use FEAT predominantly to assess a new crop (e.g. soybeans/peanuts) they’re considering or to generate a gross margin on a new crop to determine if it was profitable for them.

Others, who are more comfortable using FEAT, are using the tool to assess the likely impact of a change they are considering making to their farming practices prior to actually making the change. However it would be fair to say that growers are not so comfortable applying the process of assessing profitability to their cane farming enterprise, which indicates that while they are aware a new crop must be profitable if they are going to continue growing it, they don’t place the same expectation on their cane crop.
Pilot Group member, Bruce Peterson, discusses the cost and time savings associated with his home-made reduced tillage implement, which he has been able to quantify through the use of the FEAT tool, at an Isis Target 100 farm walk.

Prior to this project and the common use of FEAT amongst the industry, growers had very little understanding of their costs and no clear method for calculating or recording their costs. This project has really identified the importance of calculating costs and given growers a credible tool for doing so while instilling a culture of business analysis.

The general acknowledgement in the Isis region of the importance of profitability, as well as productivity, has been one of the most obvious outcomes of this project. There is an acceptance amongst the grower community of the need to consider the financial impacts of farming practices and the need to actually know if a particular crop or activity is viable. A recent Isis industry event to open a new facility at the Isis Central Sugar Mill saw every industry speaker mention the words ‘viable agribusiness’ in relation to Isis cane farms. Prior to the commencement of this project, such language was virtually never heard.
5.6 Involvement of 50 women, 14 growers and 7-10 business advisors in TPP activities

- In all, over 60 growers attended TPP workshops and a significant number (not recorded) requested copies of the FEAT workshop and had visitors from the mentors as a result of the feedback they received from those who had attended.

- Unfortunately our goal of 50 women was not achieved - 22 women attended in total. The primary reason for most wives being unable to accompany their husbands was actually their daytime work commitments off-farm. This was a surprising outcome in many respects because we had underestimated how many wives are working off farm now. Unfortunately, this is a reflection of the difficult times the industry is facing. However, it has been very encouraging to see the level of interest and uptake of FEAT by women in partnership with their husbands when their husbands brought it home from the workshop. Mentor visits identified that many wives who had been unable to attend the workshop were actively trying to use FEAT at night time either on their own or in partnership with their husbands. Some wives reported they had finally found a farm related reason to pressure their husbands to let them purchase a home computer!!

The involvement of young growers (defined here as 40 years of age or younger) was more successful with 13 young growers attending in total. There is no doubt growers in this age group were far more comfortable with a computer based tool such as FEAT and were the most enthusiastic in their response to the tool. The younger growers could see an immediate use for the tool in their businesses and readily recognised the user-friendly nature of the tool. In saying this however it should be pointed out that several of the young growers, though keen to use the tool, had very little experience with computers and were actually less adept at using a computer than some of the older growers who have effectively ‘taught themselves’ in more recent times to use a computer (particularly for internet and email usage).
Business advisors were particularly difficult to actually get to the workshops; largely because of their busy schedules and the time commitments of the workshops rather than lack of interest. It was very encouraging to see how many advisors were keen to learn more about FEAT and several in fact had already heard very positive reports from their customers on its value. These advisors actually made arrangements for the DPI&F staff to visit their offices and demonstrate FEAT to them; since that time these advisors have strongly encouraged their customers to use FEAT in their businesses. As such, some of the requests for copies of the FEAT program from growers who had not attended workshops were actually from growers whose business advisor had promoted the tool to their customers.

The district has had strong support from several banking institution advisors who regularly sponsor farm walks and field days. These advisors have regularly complemented the Isis region on their strong focus on business viability and profitability and have on occasions requested copies of FEAT generated gross margins on legume crops generated by Isis Target 100.

*Local Agribusiness Advisors (in white caps and shirts) join growers on an Isis Target 100 weed control farm walk, which focused on the cost/time savings of various weed control options in soybeans.*
5.7. Grower capacity developed through delivery of mentoring service

There is absolutely no doubt that one-on-one mentoring in the grower’s home environment is the most powerful tool in achieving greater adoption of new technology, whether it be farming practices or farm financial planning tools. The mentoring service was a highly successful vehicle for not only encouraging regular use of the TPP tools (thinking about change, continuous improvement, whole-of-farm planning, goal setting, FEAT etc) but also for fostering discussion about big picture farming issues that growers need to be tackling in these difficult times.

Some of the mentoring sessions even led to discussions about succession planning in farm businesses and how the role of a young grower involved in that business may change in the future.

Unfortunately the SMUT incursion in the Isis region stifled the ability of the mentoring service to be as effective as it could have been. This was for two reasons; firstly, the time commitments of the region’s extension and productivity staff were stretched beyond belief in response to the incursion.

In many cases, staff were working 7 days a week for months on end to deal with the most serious disease outbreak to ever face the industry. Secondly, the grower community in general was thrown into huge turmoil over the outbreak and the resulting quarantine conditions which severely impacted on growers’ ability to run their businesses. As a result, any efforts to conduct mentoring sessions for the first 12 months after the outbreak would have been completely unproductive.

However, mentoring has been occurring in more recent times as growers grapple with developing new farm plans to deal with the Smut incursion. As mentioned previously, the grower response to the need to plan for Smut management has been extremely encouraging and has resulted in many impromptu ‘mentoring sessions’ that have led to far broader discussions about the grower’s business plan than just Smut.

6. Intellectual Property:

No new information in relation to Intellectual Property aspects of this project has been identified.

7. Environmental and Social Impacts:

No new information in relation to the environmental impacts of this project has been identified. The undertaking of this project does not have any identified environmental impacts.
8. Expected Outcomes:

Workshop impact evaluation findings presented

As a result of pilot group feedback that growers shy away from too many written exercises the brief grower survey mentioned in the project proposal was removed in favour of the photo-language technique to gauge grower language, attitudes and emotions at the commencement of the workshop (grower responses are recorded by the facilitators). In addition, a number of group activities (one which includes recording the groups thoughts, feelings and ideas on paper) were conducted in the early stage of the workshop to further draw out grower attitudes/emotions/practices.

On completion of the workshop, the workshop was broken into small groups and asked to review the workshop and present their thoughts back to the larger group, another photo-language activity was conducted (grower responses are recorded by the facilitators) to assess changes in attitudes or emotions and a brief written survey was also completed by each participant.

Feedback received verbally and through the written surveys on completion of the workshop reflected the change in grower attitudes or perceptions. The impact of the workshops was quite startling on many occasions and can best be summarised through a comparative analysis of the type of language used at the start and at the end of the workshop.

Examples of ‘Start of Workshop’ attitudes/feelings outlined below:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Photos Selected</th>
<th>Reason for Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stock Exchange Chaos     | - We don’t know what direction we’re heading in  
                        | - Lots of ups and downs  
                        | - Lot of shouting  
                        | - Don’t know about event till after it’s happened |
| Two Footballers on the Field | - Competing against the world  
                               | - Represents competitive side of the sugar industry |
| People at the Pub        | - Good time to relax at the end of a hard day  
                        | - Talk to the ‘boys’ about what’s happening in the industry |
| Gone Fishing             | - Relaxing when the pressure gets too great  
                        | - Help get mind on track when things are too hard |
| Kite                     | - Instils a feeling of being free; of flying  
                        | - Up there you can see the problems before they hit; you can plan ahead |
| Man Alone Looking at the Sky | - I hope this bloke is looking to the future but could also be feeling in despair |
| Star Burst               | - Changes can lead to something new; but surrounded by peaceful sky  
                        | - May need time alone to refocus and see where the future is going |
Examples of changes in attitudes/feelings by ‘End of Workshop’ outlined below:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>END OF WORKSHOP PHOTO-LANGUAGE EXERCISE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of Photos Selected</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family BBQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in Conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Clowns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of People Around Campfire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady at Supermarket Choosing Items</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of ‘Start of Workshop’ attitudes/feelings (verbally expressed) outlined below:-

**START OF WORKSHOP ATTITUDES**

- Sugar industry is controlled by market forces outside our control; we are victims of the world market

- The district is losing growers all the time and losing farms to other crops continually

- Lot of change being FORCED on growers by government, BSES boffins etc – what do they know?

- Sugar price is not profitable

- Government doesn’t want us to survive – industry should protest more; industry bodies are not delivering

- Don’t see how we’re supposed to beat these problems

- Why have things changed so much in farming? We’re under constant pressure to adjust

- They expect us to be environmentally friendly while we can barely make a profit

- We can influence the local industry to be more cooperative for a profitable future

- These workshops are a forum to express yourself

- It was valuable to hear what others think
Examples of ‘End of Workshop’ attitudes/feelings (expressed verbally or written) outlined below:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>END OF WORKSHOP ATTITUDES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The workshop was confidence building and proved why it’s necessary to know about these things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- People often suffer through unchosen change alone but have now learnt that we ALL experience it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It’s good to look over the fence and see what positive changes other growers are adopting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There are many lessons to be learnt from other industries adjusting to deregulation or new farming practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Feel better equipped now to cope with change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The “Positive Changes” list we developed show there are a lot of things we can do about our own future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Understanding reactions to unchosen change can help us be more accepting of other people’s behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We need to be able to face reality but focus on the positive and what we can influence/change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Our old mindset of ‘close enough is good enough’ is not good enough anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- This workshop provided opportunities to learn, reflect and then implement new learnings on the farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Circles of influence and concern was challenging and demonstrated a method of letting go of unnecessary mind clutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Very positive planning and outlook to make us more confident when making decisions and thinking about change and profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Farmers need to do more planning and looking at the bigger picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- This is the best opportunity you will get to look at yourself and your actions without other people knowing your weaknesses and failures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As these examples demonstrate the feedback received on completion of the workshop reflected the impressive change in grower attitudes or perceptions. One of the most striking changes noted was the willingness of the various growers to express their thoughts and feelings quite openly by the end of the workshop. An atmosphere of trust and openness had been created in a relatively short period of time.
This atmosphere enabled the growers to allow themselves to be open to each other’s thoughts and ideas and, most importantly, to the information that was being presented. This learning further emphasises the importance of the appropriate trainers and environment for presenting information that can be difficult to absorb but offers the industry great opportunities for growth and development.

9. **Future Research Needs:**

There is a wealth of research available about human behaviour and the behaviour of farmers in Australia. Future projects in this area may not focus so much on research, but more on the application of this knowledge to farming communities in such a way that will help that community/industry to survive and prosper. Agriculture is facing one of it’s most difficult times in the history of farming – now more than ever agriculture needs farmers who are well equipped to cope with what the future may bring.

10. **Recommendations:**

Continued recognition of the importance of grower attitudes, beliefs and knowledge to the future of the sugar industry is paramount to the industry’s success. While these topics are often less appealing to growers than production-based topics, they are certainly no less important to the future of the industry.

The ability to accept and adapt to chosen and unchosen changes and a strong understanding of the business side of farming will be crucial skills for tomorrow’s farmers.

11. **Publications:**

No publications were produced.