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Catalyst's sweet success

KIMBERLEY VLASIC

FAR North farmers are at the forefront of innovation in the sugar industry and their ideas could soon go global

Coca-Cola runs 209 projects in 61 countries but is so impressed by the results achieved by Queensland cane growers through Project Catalyst, it wants to launch the program overseas.

"We've gone from 18 to 78 farmers and cover around 20,000ha," said Coca-Cola South Pacific president Robert Mercade.

"I would like that to continue growing locally but I would also like for the company and entities such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to learn from this and expand this type of project globally."

Catalyst farmers, including 15 from the Far North, and program partners this week gathered at the Pullman International in Cairns for the annual forum.

Projects range from using telemetry to improve water efficiency to trialling different variations of mill mud and fertilisers in a bid to cut costs and achieve better environmental outcomes.

Terrain Natural Resource Management (NRM) Project Catalyst co-ordinator Michael Waring said as well as being a celebration of farmers' work, the forum offered valuable networking opportunities.

"Now they know about their projects and if they're doing something along the same line ... they quite freely pick up the phone and ring Fred in Mackay and say: 'I heard you talking about this, I

was going to do this, do you think it would work?," he said.

"What fails is just as important as what works most times."

"We believe farmer-led innovation is the way to go, it isn't about scientists," added

Terrain NRM chief executive Carole Sweatman.

"It's actually about the farmer working on this but with scientists and other people to support that."

Reef Catchments chief executive Rob Cocco helped design Catalyst, which started in 2009, and said the model had worked across different growing regions.

"I think our challenge now is how do we transfer those learnings through to main-

stream producers so they equally can see the benefits of this sort of program and the practices," he said.

"I think the other key one is we're quite keen to expand the project so we can work with more growers ... and obviously that all comes down to dollars and budgetary capabilities.

"With more investment in the program, whether that be public or private, we have greater opportunity to expand it to more producers."



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I've had two projects running, the first was a bit of a failure. For the second, we're working on soil biology and soil health, and we're going to keep it running for three years. We've been reducing fertiliser inputs and using soil biology to counteract that, we haven't lost any production and so far it's looking interesting. Hopefully one day, we can do the whole farm.
Mario Raccanello, Tully

My husband Tom was interested in being involved in a grower group with innovative ideas and I like to come along and listen to what's being talked about and attend all the workshops, I find it interesting. I don't actively work on the farm anymore but enjoy networking and catching up with others in the industry.
Bruna Gilbert, Ingham

We've done two projects with Catalyst now, the most recent one involved nitrogen application using slow release fertilisers. Before that, we trialled different types of soy beans ... We basically only had one variety that was suitable to tropical growing, so we brought in some varieties from Africa and trialled them. We've got a couple of those varieties commercialised now, so we've got more options growing soybeans. It benefits the sugar industry because we're under increasing pressure to limit our nitrogen and better target our nitrogen to our requirements and these are ways we have to evolve so that we're having less impact on the Reef as far as nitrogen run-off goes.
Tom Gilbert, Ingham

I'm trialling reduced nitrogen rates on final returns and different rates of mill mud. I'm trying to see how much the crop actually needs to grow that last year because there might be some room for reduction there. It's looking promising. I got involved in Project Catalyst because the other growers seem to be like-minded, looking forward in the industry and thinking outside the square.
Chris Condon, Tully

EXCHANGING IDEAS: Farmers Mario Raccanello, Bruna Gilbert, Tom Gilbert and Chris Condon attended the Project Catalyst forum at the Pullman International in Cairns.

Picture: BRENDAN RADKE