# IMPROVING WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY (WHS)
IN THE SUGARCANE INDUSTRY

In 2020, Richard Franklin and Jemma King from James Cook University undertook a project to validate the Best Management Practices (BMP) resources for WHS, highlight resources that exist which can be used to enact WHS practices and adoption and explore the barriers and enablers to WHS (including the completion of the BMP module). This work was funded by Sugar Research Australia and supported by multiple industry participants. This information sheet summarises some of the key findings.

METHODS

The desktop audit included a review of the workers compensation data for the industry and focus groups and interviews. The desktop audit reviewed the Smartcane BMP WHS module content, proposed suggestions for edits and presented an overview of other industry and wider WHS resources. A review of the workers compensation data for the industry for the period 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2019 was used to determine the types of incidents that are occurring on farms and used this as a way to identify some of the more common WHS hazards present on Queensland farms. Finally, focus groups and interviews were conducted between August and December 2020.
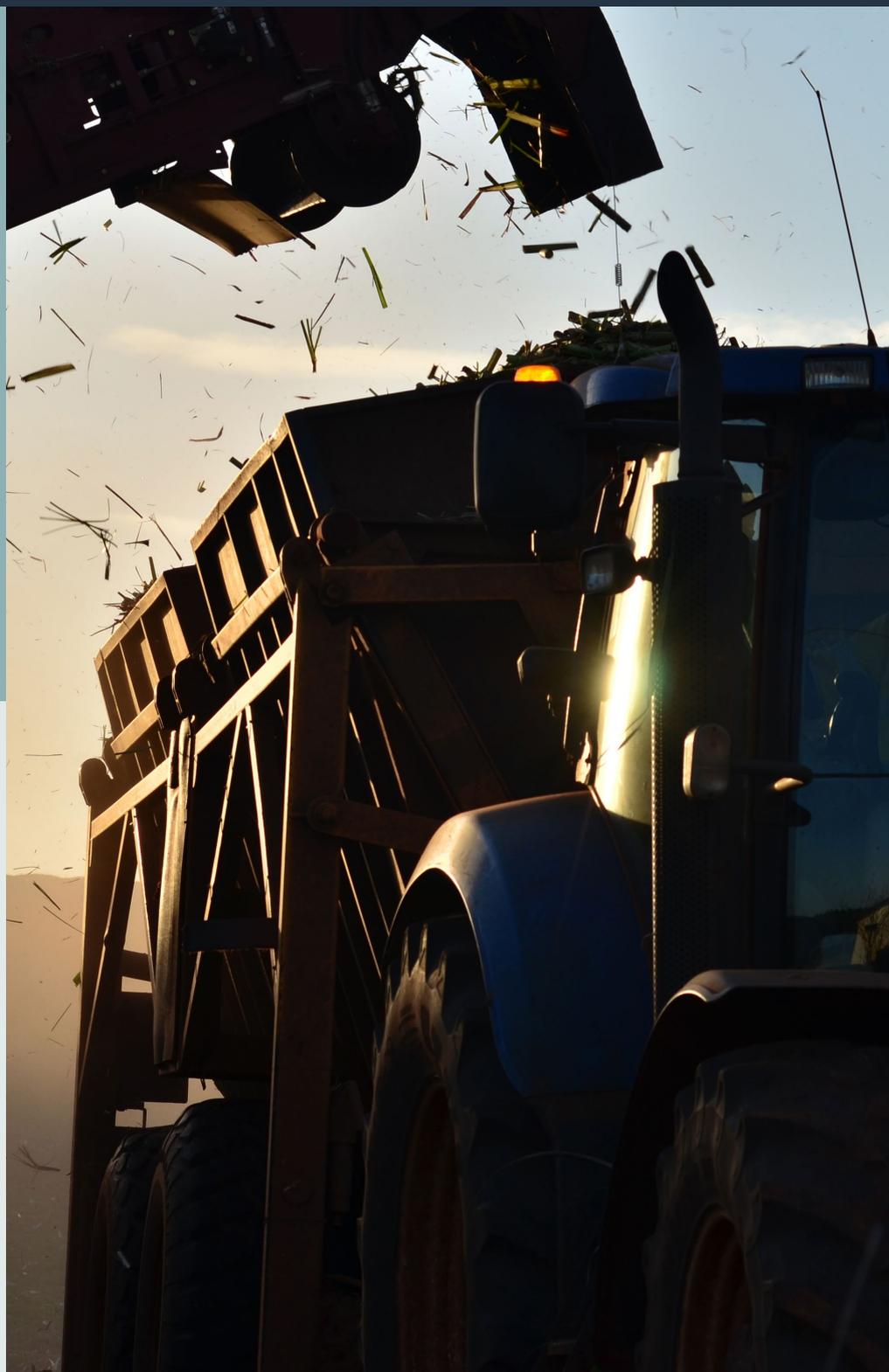
The report made the following findings generally in relation to WHS in the sugar industry:

- Incident occurrence is influenced by the competence of the workforce and fatigue but includes mechanisms such as electrical, falls and lifting/lifters issues.

- Broad WHS concerns are the difficulty of navigating legislation, determining the minimum to comply and implications based on the size of operation and presence of employees.

- Change is occurring but is typically a slow process. Change and willingness to change happens along a continuum and having targeted information to suit the different stages will be more useful than a blanket approach.

- Navigating safety discussions seems to be generally confined to a farmer's own operation with a general reluctance to tell others what to do as this is out of place outside of their own property.

- Concerns were raised about making WHS procedures too onerous and impractical. Principal to this is the many often competing demands on the growers' time and resources.

- Incidents often serve as important reminders, increase vigilance (initially) and could be leveraged for safety advancement and industry communication.

- Workforce competence, including of contractor employees, and mechanisms to enhance competence are important.

- Acknowledging complacency is an issue and attempting to interrupt this when it is noted to occur.

- WHS can often be perceived as a cost but flipping this narrative to show that WHS supports work processes and productivity. Clear demonstrations of this in practice might be useful.

- Thinking about who WHS benefits – employer, employee, families and the larger community. Reflecting on this and prioritising returning home at the end of day can often be an emotive but compelling message.

- Showcasing good examples and hoping these can permeate to others.

- Drawing on lessons from other industries, utilising the experience others have gained when working in other industries for the benefit of practices in the sugar industry. Central to this is an acknowledgement of why these practices have been implemented elsewhere.

- Knowing where people go to seek out safety information and what prompts this help-seeking behaviour can ensure there are appropriate safety resources in place.

There is a need for the industry to develop evidence-based, up-to-date information materials to help the sugarcane industry meet its WHS legislative requirements. This should include further work exploring compensated injuries and how these could be prevented, development of 'how to' guides, case studies, fact sheets and information sessions to inform prevention actions. This could include using incident windows (i.e. following an event) to educate and provide incentives (subject to funding) for growers to make change based on the previously developed resources.

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