

HARVEST MATE - MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE Paddock

Earlier this year there was a buzz amongst canefarmers and cane harvesting contractors that hadn't been felt before. There was an exciting new tool that promised to create change, and with it increase profitability in the paddock.

After more than four years in the making, *Harvest Mate*, the online platform with smartphone App, was launched and made freely available for industry use.

Four months later, SRA Agricultural Machinery Specialist, Phil Patane says that *Harvest Mate* is already delivering on its commitment as he supports growers and contractors who have

embraced the decision-support tool and are seeing its benefits this season.

"The interest and uptake of *Harvest Mate* has been as we'd hoped," Phil said.

"There are some growers who have signed up online to see what it's all about, but they are holding off to see what happens with users this harvest. There are others who have jumped right in to give it a go this season.

"And why's that? Because *Harvest Mate* links agronomics with economics," he said.

"You won't find many other tools that do that. And the ease of using *Harvest Mate* is because we've

listened to hundreds of growers and contractors.

"At the end of the day a farmer wants to know if practice change is worth the time, effort, and money. The question they have is 'What is the cost and benefit for me to go from this practice to that practice?'" Phil said.

"Some growers and harvesting contractors may question the benefits of *Harvest Mate* compared to a yield loss, or cane loss monitor. A key difference is that those tools are telling you what you've done after harvesting. Whereas *Harvest Mate* is a forward-looking tool to help you consider which harvesting options will increase your income. It can also be used to help you adapt what you're doing in the field to reach your optimal practice."

Phil and SRA staff are currently supporting 12 growers and harvesting contractors in the Mulgrave, South Johnstone, Tully/Kennedy, Herbert and Mackay districts - across 1 million tonnes of cane. These early users of *Harvest Mate* will provide valuable feedback on the tool for future users.

Harvest Mate workshops kicked off in Ingham (pictured) and were well attended at all sites along the Queensland coast.



Growers and harvesting contractors who attended the *Harvest Mate* workshop in Tully included (left to right) Roy Butcher, Steven Crema and Peter Reed.

Harvesting contractor Ian Ghidella has been using *Harvest Mate* in the Tully district this season and says he's pleased to see that the recommendations he's getting from the tool are very close to what he is actually doing.

"It's good to see that I am running the harvester to best practice," Ian said.

"The App recommended I run the fan a little slower at times, especially around a light topping cane. On a heavy lodged crop, it recommended I increase the fan a bit more.

"It's all a matter of tweaking but it's these one per cent improvements that all add up economically," he said.

Ian also said that setting up and using *Harvest Mate* was straightforward thanks to the one-on-one support from Phil.

"My priority now," Phil said. "Is to work with other SRA staff and industry advisors who can support the uptake of *Harvest Mate* in their district. I'll be carrying out training soon.

"Next season we hope to see many more users benefiting from the App, with the help of these advisors, and sharing with the industry the added benefits that *Harvest Mate* can bring. But our work isn't going to stop there.

Harvest Mate was made possible thanks to the contribution by economists from the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF).

DAF Manager, Agricultural Economics, Mark Poggio says the *Harvest Mate* project has achieved what it set out to do and raised new opportunities.

"Adoption of any new decision-support tool is always going to be a challenge, and harvesting has its own challenges for growers and harvesting operations as well as implications for the milling sector," Mark said.

"*Harvest Mate* has been very successful since its launch earlier this year. That was reflected in the attendance at the workshops that SRA and DAF held along the Queensland coast.

"We had a number of growers come up to us after the presentation saying they'd like to register to use the online platform and App. And I know Phil and other SRA staff have been working hard to support users and assist with adoption.

"Our next challenge is how we (together with SRA) move forward with what is already a great tool, to see how we can make it even better.

"DAF is keen to explore opportunities for future development of this tool in collaboration with SRA and will be looking at feedback we get from users this year."

"The added beauty of this tool is that industry came to SRA and DAF with a problem," Phil added.

"Growers and contractors wanted to know what the cane loss was in dollars during harvesting (Project 2016/955). With *Harvest Mate* we're now able to answer that question, but as with all new technology, once you develop it, you want to see what more you can get from it.

"An additional component to the tool we would like to see in the near future is to make it automated; that is live and accessible in the cab. That will allow growers and contractors to review fan feeds, ground speeds and yield in real-time," he said.

"And we've got more questions we'd like answered, the first being burnt cane. We'd like to include that as a component of *Harvest Mate* but that's an additional project for the future.

"For the moment we're very happy seeing the productivity and profitability improvements our first *Harvest Mate* graduates are making and excited about working with more growers and harvesting contractors next season."

[Click to read more about Harvest Mate on SRA's website](#)

SRA acknowledges the invaluable research contribution by economists from the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) for the development of this tool, as well as funding from DAF for its delivery.



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