

Review of the BSES PROSPER and SRDC BSS260

Enhanced delivery of PROSPER
to achieve adoption of
Best Management Practices in the
Queensland sugar industry

May 2004

Review Panel:

25 May 2004

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Review Panel found that, overall, PROSPER has provided (staff) resources and a realignment framework which has resulted in an improved direction and ramping up of extension activities in BSES. The SRDC funded BSS260 has provided specific support positions in most regions which have clearly defined roles. It was designed to 'fill evident gaps' and these positions have been seen essential for the critical mass needed to realign extension and support activities.

The BSES extension effort as presented through PROSPER and the support funding of BSS260 is, overall, impressive and up with best practice in extension.

It is noted that in some areas PROSPER and its accompanying local initiative (for example the Cane Productivity Initiative in Burdekin and Herbert) have resulted in significant changes in the emphasis of extension activities. The high level of effort into productivity groups/forums as opposed to occasional shed meetings is an example of this. In other areas, PROSPER and BSS260 funding has allowed the existing extension effort to continue by maintaining staff and resources with less change in emphasis. This latter situation needs further attention.

The quantitative analysis of improvements in productivity in the Burdekin which shifted to a very strong emphasis on grower groups with over 60% of growers involved has indicated that this strategy is on the right track.

Where clear goals and benchmarking was apparent, there appeared to be a stronger focus and this should be broadened to all regions.

There are good examples of increased cooperation across industries and significant increased group activities with a high level of grower involvement in some areas. Regions that had a central office and where BSES staff were in close proximity to other organisations had networking advantages over more dispersed regions.

The use and management of grower groups is quite variable between different regions – with varied understanding of adult learning, action learning and grower driven. There is further scope to improve group activities and increase grower to grower sharing and learning across most regions. It is evident that further staff and grower participant training (group and facilitation skills) is needed to move groups more strongly to a grower lead 'action-learning' orientation. Recruiting new and younger staff was also seen to add to the rate of change in this extension direction.

Industry political, structural and resourcing issues are major limitations to the effectiveness of extension and the Prosper initiative.

The Review Panel was very concerned about the decrease in the grower service fee for BSES and the impact on extension activity and sustainability following the ramp-up and progress over the last two years. Growers that were spoken with during the review also expressed their concern. In the Panel's view, and in light of the documented impact of the extension activities and impact on the industry, even at 10 cents, the service fee is too low. The comparison with the CANEGROWER membership fee of 28 cents/tonne highlights the inadequacy.

Recommendations:

No.	Priority	Details
1	**** *	Recommendation 1: <i>Clear short (annual) and medium term (3 year) goals should be developed in all regions together with a practical evaluation plan to measure against these goals.</i>
2	***	Recommendation 2: <i>The emphasis on grower groups should continue and developed further in areas where they are underdeveloped. Different groupings could also be used to a greater extent - eg environment group, women's group, young farmers' group, innovation group, water-quality monitoring group.</i>
3	****	Recommendation 3: <i>Increased training should be provided to staff and grower leaders in the management and facilitation of grower-driven groups.</i>
4	***	Recommendation 4: <i>A budget line should be included in Prosper to provide funds for extension staff (i.e. BSES and other staff from industry involved with extension) to meet together on a state-wide basis to share approaches and learnings as well as to receive further training together. It may be appropriate to use the ASSCT conference as a forum for this process.</i>
5	***	Recommendation 5: <i>COMPASS and the Farm Management System should be a major thrust for benchmarking Best Management Practice and state-wide strategies should develop broad industry support and involvement and support extension officers in their delivery. An SRDC-funded project should be developed which compiles BMP and FMS Benchmark Booklets specific to each region.</i>
6	***	Recommendation 6: <i>A full range of latest BMP information should be available to all sugar growers via the internet.</i>
7	****	Recommendation 7: <i>A broader view of capacity building and 'increasing the capacity of industry to cope with adversity' should be taken to include leadership, critical thinking and planning skills.</i>
8	***	Recommendation 8: <i>Greater attention should be placed on monitoring cost reductions in the extension program and in measuring its impact. Regional successes should be picked up by other regions.</i>
9	****	Recommendation 9: <i>The quantitative analysis and benchmarking used in the Burdekin should be copied in other mill areas where possible. Annual surveys of practice change linked to research indications of impact should also be used to establish areas of greatest gain.</i>
10	***	Recommendation 10: <i>There should be a process of peer review of extension programs to assist in focusing programs against regional priorities rather than the strengths of the extension officer.</i>

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11	*****	Recommendation 11: <i>There should be an opportunity for all growers to be able to attend productivity groups in all regions. This may be a mixture of 'host' invited attendees as well as cross-geographical groups. BSES administrative resources and communication mechanisms should assist in ensuring that participants know about group meetings in plenty of time.</i>
12	***	Recommendation 12: <i>Appropriate charges should be developed state-wide for such services as soil testing. If this means that growers go elsewhere for these services, then this should be accepted as appropriate market forces which free staff up for other activities. When defining what services BSES charge for, these should be clearly highlighted to growers. It is important to work closely with productivity groups and other industry groups so that the roles the different groups play are complementary and that any changes to the way services are offered are not undermine.</i>
13	***	Recommendation 13: <i>Tools and approaches for benchmarking and comparing costs and returns should be pooled across regions for broader industry benefit.</i>
14	*****	Recommendation 14: <i>SRDC should provide resources to pilot the development of a farmer-led research and extension group. The group would need to be led by a farming community with support provided by BSES, productivity groups, Mills etc, but leadership coming from the community.</i>
15	***	Recommendation 15: <i>BSES and SRDC should assess the viability of piloting an FM500 group or groups in the various regions. FM500 targets growers who are very keen to stretch their capability in farm and financial benchmarking.</i>
16	*****	Recommendation 16: <i>A project should be designed which explores the strengths and weaknesses of using market segmentation to design tools and material which allows the targeting of both full time farmers and cane farm owners who spend large amounts of time away from the farm earning income. This could build on the unfunded proposal to SRDC from the Northern Region.</i>
17	***	Recommendation 17: <i>SRDC and BSES should work closely with all parties to design a media strategy of good news stories to promote the sugar industry and their efforts to improve productivity and environmental dimensions to overcome the myths that abound both within their communities and to wider Australia.</i>
18	***	Recommendation 18: <i>The scope of PROSPER should be extended to include the total farming system including Work Place Health and Safety, keeping farm records, environmental audits etc.</i>
19	*****	Recommendation 19: <i>Given the evidence of impact of the activities undertaken through Prosper and the support by BSS260 and the need to maintain the momentum to realise the full benefits to the industry, the Panel recommends that BSES continues to fund Prosper at its current levels and that SRDC continues with its support funding for BSS260 for at least a further funding cycle.</i>