



QUEENSLAND  
FARMERS'  
FEDERATION



# Draft Burdekin Regional Water Assessment Report **August 2025**

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**Prepared for**  
The Department of Local Government,  
Water and Volunteers

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This submission is provided to:

The Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers

Submitted via email: [regionalwaterassessments@rdmw.qld.gov.au](mailto:regionalwaterassessments@rdmw.qld.gov.au)

### Our members

- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Cotton Australia
- Canegrowers
- Greenlife Industry QLD
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Pork Queensland
- Australian Chicken Meat Federation
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallowa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Lockyer Valley Water Users

# About the Queensland Farmers' Federation



## **The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.**

Our members are agricultural peak bodies who collectively represent more than 13,000 farmers who produce food, fibre and foliage across the state.

QFF's peak body members come together to develop policy and lead projects on the key issues that are important to their farmer members and the Queensland agriculture sector.

Together, we form a strong, unified voice leveraging our effectiveness by working together to drive policy and initiatives that support a strong future for Queensland agriculture.

## **Submission**

### **Executive Summary**

The Burdekin region is a nationally significant irrigation district supporting high-value sugarcane and horticultural production. Irrigated agriculture underpins substantial regional employment, economic activity contributing to Queensland's export revenue making water affordability and reliability critical to the region's prosperity.

The Draft Burdekin Regional Water Assessment identifies four shortlisted infrastructure initiatives with potential benefits for irrigation:

1. Burdekin-Haughton Water Supply Scheme Modernisation
  - Benefits for irrigated agriculture: Reduces water losses, improves reliability or supply during peak irrigation periods, and enables more precise allocation to sugarcane and horticultural growers, supporting production stability and yield optimisation.
2. Lower Burdekin Bulk Infrastructure Modernisation
  - Benefits for irrigated agriculture: Enhances system reliability, reduces downtime and maintenance disruption, and provides consistent water delivery to both sugarcane growers and horticultural growers.
3. Upper Burdekin Off-Stream Storage
  - Benefits to irrigated agriculture: Provides additional storage to support development and potential expansion of perennial horticulture, delivering water availability during dry periods, and support investment in high-value crops by reducing reliance on variable in-stream allocations.
4. Capacity Upgrades of the Burdekin-Haughton Scheme (subject to demand growth)
  - Benefits to irrigated agriculture: Ensures sugarcane and horticultural growers can access sufficient water during critical growth stages, supporting the expansion of existing farms while mitigating the risk of reduced production during periods of high demand.

QFF supports the recommendations and proposed implementation timelines, recognising that these initiatives have the potential to improve delivery efficiency and reliability of water for irrigated agriculture.

However, the draft assessment gives limited attention to non-infrastructure initiatives specifically on-farm efficiency measures that continue to support advanced irrigation scheduling and precision irrigation technologies and groundwater recharge mitigation. These initiatives are a critical component of the regional water assessment, complementing the potential investment in the shortlisted infrastructure initiatives, improving water use efficiency for the growers while mitigating rising groundwater levels in the region.

### **QFF Key Recommendations:**

- Include on-farm efficiency programs as a core priority in the final RWA.
- Protect irrigators from disproportionate cost impacts arising from infrastructure upgrades, ensuring a detailed cost benefit analysis is completed in consultation with the regions irrigated agricultural sector.
- Secure affordable and reliable water allocations for irrigated agriculture.

A balanced approach integrating infrastructure refurbishment and upgrades, on-farm efficiencies measures in addition to safeguards for affordability and allocation will ensure water within the Burdekin catchment continues to support sustainable irrigated agriculture, regional employment and economic resilience.

### **Affordability and Allocation**

While the infrastructure initiatives have merit, they may also increase scheme costs. Irrigators risk experiencing increased water charges if:

- Capital recovery is not equitably shared across all users,
- Industrial demand decreases, leaving rural water users to cover a greater share of fixed costs, and
- Staged or flexible investment strategies are not implemented.

QFF recommend:

- Development of equitable pricing frameworks that distribute scheme costs fairly across all users, ensuring irrigators are not left to absorb cost burdens arising from policy changes, cross industry subsidies, or shifts in government support,
- Securing long-term contributions and commitments from industrial users, and
- Adopt a staged and consultative approach to the investigation of major infrastructure works, ensuring that investments are clearly justified, proportionate to need, and designed to minimise cost impacts on allocation holders over time.

### **Non-Infrastructure On-Farm Water Use Efficiency Option Priority**

The draft places limited emphasis on on-farm efficiency initiatives. Programs that support advanced irrigation scheduling, precision irrigation technologies, soil moisture monitoring, soil health improvements and groundwater recharge mitigation can:

- Provide significant water savings,
- Improve operational efficiency of irrigation scheme regions, and

- Complement large-scale scheme modernisation and infrastructure upgrades.

QFF strongly encourages the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers to include on-farm efficiency as a core priority, supporting sustainable production for sugarcane and horticultural growers while demonstrating this priority a balanced, cost-effective approach to on-farm water management.

## Conclusion

The draft identifies important infrastructure options to improve irrigation reliability and efficiency. QFF supports the recommendations and proposed implementation of timelines, while emphasising that benefits will only be fully realised if coupled with:

- Protections for affordability to irrigators by committing to pricing frameworks that reflect only prudent and efficient costs of scheme operation, maintenance and refurbishment, excluding any return to government beyond the genuine costs of service delivery.
- Secured access to reliable water for agriculture, and
- Inclusion of on-farm efficiency initiatives as a core, non-infrastructure priority.
- Recognition and active management of rising groundwater as a significant threat to farming viability and the broader regional economy, with government and industry collaboration essential to effective solutions.

A strategic and balanced approach integrating infrastructure upgrades, on-farm efficiency measures, and allocation safeguards will ensure water within the Burdekin catchment continues to support sustainable sugarcane and horticultural production, regional employment and the broader economic contribution of irrigated agriculture.

Yours sincerely

Jo Sheppard  
Chief Executive Officer



**This submission is provided by the Queensland Farmers' Federation**

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