Australian Bananas

Australian Banana Growers

ISSUE 76 | APRIL 2026

GROWING MOMENTUM

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NO BANANA IMPORTS

No new pests and diseases for Australia

Don’t risk our $1.3 billion industry + our growers, families and communities

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A NOTE FROM THE CEO

Leanne Erakovic

This edition's column comes to you from 35,000 feet, cruising at around 900km per hour en route to the nation's capital.

Alongside Deputy Chair Stephen Lowe and our Stakeholder Engagement and Advocacy Manager Kathryn Dryden, I'm heading to Canberra to ensure the banana industry is front and centre with Australia's key decision-makers.

It's always been important to maintain a strong presence in Parliament House. Right now though, it feels more critical than ever. With the threat of imports on the horizon, rising fuel and fertiliser costs, increasing pressure on crop protection tools and more, our industry is facing a complex and rapidly shifting landscape. It's essential that your voice is heard at the highest levels. In addition to targeted, banana-focused meetings, we're also contributing to broader advocacy through the NFF Horticulture Council, ensuring our issues are part of the national conversation.

The strongest messages we take to Canberra come directly from ABGC's Grower Members. Thank you to those who have taken the time to share your experiences with us recently. I know that after a long day on-farm, completing a survey is the last thing you feel like doing, but it genuinely makes a difference. Real data and real stories carry far more weight than general statements ever could.

Recently, many of you told us how fuel and fertiliser costs are impacting your bottom line. You reported fuel levies rising by around 40 per cent, fertiliser prices jumping by as much as $600 in a fortnight, and freight costs increasing by tens of thousands of dollars almost overnight. While your identity is always treated with strict confidentiality, the strength of this evidence has already allowed us to take a clear, credible case directly to Agriculture Minister Julie Collins.

We understand that, as growers, passing these costs on simply isn't an option. Meanwhile, the day-to-day realities don't pause - managing weather events, securing labour, and continuing to produce a high-quality product in increasingly challenging conditions.

Please know this: in Canberra this week, and every week, we are taking your experiences, your challenges and your priorities with us. We are advocating strongly, strategically and consistently for your future.

CHECKING IN WITH THE CHAIR

Leon Collins

There's a lot to love about growing bananas. And it's a good thing, because at times like this, it can feel like the challenges are stacking up.

Rising pressures

Crop protection is one of the biggest issues on the table right now. I'm hearing it from growers across the industry, and seeing it firsthand on farm - the impact of a changing chemical landscape is real. We all want to use safe, environmentally sound options to manage pests and disease, but the reality is we're working with fewer and fewer tools.

It was a key topic at the recent ABGC Board meeting, and it's encouraging to see it recognised and prioritised by Hort Innovation. The truth is, though, that solutions take time and time is something many growers feel they don't have.

In the meantime, we keep doing what we do best: producing high-quality, nutritious fruit despite the challenges. But as long as we're expected to meet traditional standards around appearance, this issue isn't going anywhere.

You can read more about the work underway, current management options and ABGC's role on page 16.

On top of this, there are immediate and unavoidable pressures hitting the bottom line. Fuel, freight and fertiliser costs continue to climb, and as Leanne outlines in her column (page 4), much of this is outside our control. Like many of you, we're left with little choice but to absorb these increases and for some businesses, that's going to bite hard.

Biosecurity – this is your sign

We've now hit the 11th detection of Panama TR4 in the Tully Valley. If you've delayed getting your on-farm biosecurity measures in place, it's time to prioritise and get prepared. We've always known the disease would spread and the efforts of growers, industry and Government have bought us time that many other countries haven't had to get on the front foot. Use whatever we have left wisely. There are a number of people who can help you, both within ABGC (see page 35 for more) and through the DPI (see page 38 for a great example of putting a plan in place).

Imports fight goes on

I want to reassure you that, alongside these challenges, our work on banana imports remains a top priority. Under the leadership of Banana Imports Committee Chair Paul Inderbitzin, preparations are continuing behind the scenes to defend Australia's strong biosecurity settings. With the Federal Government's technical visit to the Philippines expected to have taken place by the time you read this, the risk assessment process is progressing. We're making sure industry is ready for what comes next. More on that from page 12.

To finish on a positive note, it's worth recognising the strength of this industry. Across this edition of Australian Bananas, you'll see the results of that, from strong uptake of Best Management Practice, to advances in banana breeding, and the next generation of growers stepping up. There's a lot to be proud of, even in tougher times.

Years ending 30th June. (in '000 tonnes)	
2014	371
2015	371
2016	393
2017	414
2018	388
2019	372
2020	382
2021	403
2022	375
2023	371
2024	369

ANNUAL BANANA VOLUMES

The national banana levy collected by the Federal Department of Agriculture is compulsory for commercial banana growers. It is 2.19 cents per kilogram of bananas sold.

The dollars collected show an estimate of production for the previous financial year. Right is a table of the levy-based banana volumes. For non-industry participants, please note this is an approximation of production, but not all bananas grown are sold, i.e. some don't make the retailer-required specifications. Also, there is a lag factor, in that levies paid on June sales (at least) are paid in the following financial year.

Most commercial banana growers in Australia pay the banana levy – but there are some exceptions. Essentially, a producer of bananas (the person who owns the bananas immediately after harvest) is liable to pay the levy. A producer will NOT be liable for levies if, in a financial year, the total quantity of bananas sold by retail sale amounts to less than $100 of levy. More detail on exemptions from paying the levy and other information can be found at: agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/levies/rates/ bananas.

BANANA LEVY RATE

The make-up and purpose of the various components of the Banana Industry Levy are as follows.

Levy Amount	Purpose:
0.50c /kg	Plant Health Australia (PHA) levy: The Department sends the funds to PHA, for the ongoing containment and management of Panama Tropical Race 4 disease, and to conduct activities that aim to improve biosecurity within the banana industry.
1.69c /kg	Hort Innovation (HIA) levy. The Department sends the funds to HIA for R&D and Marketing: 0.54 c/Kg is for Banana R&D, which is matched dollar for dollar by the Department and 1.15 c/kg for Banana Marketing.
Total = 2.19c /kg* (32.85c per 15kg carton)	

The Banana PHA levy currently funds the containment of the first TR4 infested farm that the industry purchased and the industry's part of the cost-sharing deed with the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for TR4 containment. It also funds the pre-existing commitments – Torres Straight Exotic Fruit Flies Eradication Response, PHA membership/ meetings and Government levy collection.

Further information: **Leanne Erakovic ceo@abgc.org.au** Phone – **07 3278 4786**.More info on the levy rate: **https://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/levies/rates/bananas.**

ALL ON THE TABLE: ISSUES FACING INDUSTRY TACKLED BY BOARD

The Board of the Australian Banana Growers' Council met in Brisbane in March, with a clear focus on the issues hitting growers hardest right now: chemical access, rising fuel and fertiliser costs, Panama TR4 and the ongoing pressure from imports. The Board also heard directly from key industry partners:

Hort Innovation

Hort Innovation provided an update on consultation for the next banana Strategic Investment Plan, including where levy investment is headed and the priorities for the years ahead. There was also a focus on trials, AgVet applications and the work under way to improve access to critical crop protection tools (more detail on page 16).

Foodbank

Foodbank Queensland highlighted opportunities for growers to support communities while reducing waste. If you're interested in getting involved or exploring donation pathways, you can contact James Fien at **james.f@foodbankqld.org.au**

ArmHub

Directors visited ArmHub in Brisbane to see a prototype robotic dehander in action. While it's still some way off commercial use, it was a valuable opportunity to see where the technology is heading, ask questions and provide grower feedback to help shape future development.

Representatives from ABGC, ArmHub, QUT, BNL Industrial Solutions and Hort Innovation had the opportunity to see the robotic dehander prototype in action.

ABGC's Board of Directors and executive leadership team met at the Brisbane Markets in March.

PROTECT WORKERS, PROTECT INDUSTRY

If you see or hear about illegal recruitment practices, migrant worker exploitation, or any activity that undermines fair employment in our industry, it's important to report it. You can do so confidentially, and even anonymously, by submitting a Border Watch Online Report. You can search for the form on the Home Affairs website (**homeaffairs.gov.au**). By reporting concerns, you are helping safeguard workers, protect your business and uphold the integrity of the banana industry.

DON'T LET PLASTICS BECOME A PROBLEM

With wet season conditions and flooding still a risk, now's the time to make sure farm plastics – especially banana bags – are properly secured.
Loose plastics can quickly end up in creeks and rivers, creating headaches for neighbours, communities and the industry's reputation.

What to do:

- Secure all plastics well away from flood-prone areas, creeks and riverbanks
- Dispose of waste through the proper channels
- Do not burn banana bags

If you're in Far North Queensland and see an issue, report it to the QLD Government Pollution Hotline on **1300 130 372.**

YOUR LEVIES: 5 THINGS TO KNOW

As part of ongoing efforts to improve communication about the impact of your levies for your industry, we're introducing a Hort Innovation update into Australian Bananas to share '5 things' that are currently relevant and may be of interest.

1 A new Banana Investment Roadmap is coming.

Grower input is driving the next Banana Investment Roadmap, which will replace the current Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) when it concludes.

The roadmap builds on consultation at past R&D issues workshops, extension program activities and the existing SIP. The opportunity to have input was provided to all growers via a feedback form circulated in ABGC's e-bulletins. In total, more than 120 growers and others in the industry have informed this work. There has been input from all the growing regions and a full range of business sizes.

Top priorities are:

- Crop protection – including regulation support, new and emerging solutions and the integration of chemical and other tools into pest and disease management approaches
- Biosecurity preparedness (including TR4)
- Variety evaluation (with focus on mitigating risk posed by TR4 and other diseases)
- Driving domestic demand for Australian grown bananas

...and practical, peer-led extension and communication to inform and support grower awareness and uptake of research and practices to improve their profitability. Articles on pages 17 and 22 are examples of how the levy funded extension program enables growers to realise value from research projects.

What happens next:

The draft roadmap is currently being reviewed by both banana industry R&D and Marketing Strategic Investment Advisory Panels. The plan will be shared with growers in a new dashboard coming online in September. This digital and dynamic plan will improve visibility of your levy investments, the ability to regularly review and adjust priorities, and to identify opportunities for cross-industry investment.

2 Frontiers: backing big ideas for bananas

Some of the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the banana industry are shared across horticulture and are best tackled at scale. Hort Innovation's Frontiers program is designed to extend and amplify levy-funded R&D by unlocking larger, cross-industry investments that accelerate innovation and attract co-investment.

Frontiers investments span areas such as crop protection, automation, data and emerging technologies, helping extend and amplify outcomes that individual industries, including bananas, can benefit from. Head to page 26 to understand how Frontiers works, see some of our current projects and learn how growers and industry participants can get involved.

3 Building consumer demand beyond the bunch

Marketing investment continues to build momentum for Australian bananas, with activity focused on cutting through a crowded marketplace and strengthening connections with consumers, retailors and communities.

From high-impact national campaigns and major events, to reinforcing the 'Australian Grown' message and engaging the next generation of banana consumers, marketing investment is designed to deliver both immediate reach and long-term demand growth. To find out more about recent campaign performance, what's resonating with consumers, and where the focus is headed next, head to page 40.

4 Bananas (& you?) front and centre at the Royal Melbourne Show

Last year, Australian Bananas wowed at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, with a stand that pulled a crowd, demonstrating

the value of face-to-face marketing. Visitors enjoyed more than 73,000 banana samples, and 94 per cent of those surveyed said they were very likely to purchase bananas after the experience. You can read more about the Sydney activation in the August 2025 edition of Australian Bananas (abgc.org.au/magazine).

We're back at it again this year, returning to the Sydney Royal Easter Show and also heading to the Royal Melbourne Show (24 September – 4 October). It's a great opportunity to promote the industry and connect directly with consumers

Consider getting involved and help us showcase Australian bananas. To find out more or express interest, contact Emma Day, Marketing, Hort Innovation.

5 Stay informed

Hort Innovation shares regular updates on levy investments, projects and opportunities, but you're in control of what you receive. If you already get our emails, simply click 'Manage Preferences' at the bottom of your next email to choose the communications that matter most to you.

Not receiving any Hort Innovation updates? You can sign up via the Hort Innovation website and select which emails you'd like to receive, whether that's industry news, project updates or opportunities to get involved.

Hort Innovation BANANA FUND

Brought to you by Sarah Strutt, Industry Service Manager, Hort Innovation. To view Banana Fund details and contacts for Sarah, the marketing team and more, simply scan the QR code.

LEADING THE CHARGE: PAUL INDERBITZIN

The Banana Imports Committee has been casting a watchful eye over the imports space for more than twenty years, having formed prior to the early 2000s campaign.

It's currently led by Lakeland grower Paul Inderbitzin. Part of a multi-generational farming family, Paul has demonstrated a long-term commitment to improving outcomes for the banana industry while running his successful farming business.

Paul's passion for this cause is deeply personal. Like banana farming families across the country, the risks brought on by imports threaten his family's legacy and their livelihood in the future. Committed to fighting this cause with strategy and science, he's got skin in the game spurring him on.

Paul's knowledge of farming, media experience and qualifications make him a valuable and effective advocate.

A snapshot of Paul's achievements:

- Third-generation banana grower
- 2013 Nuffield Scholar, completing his study in biosecurity and waste reduction
- Former director, Australian Banana Growers' Council
- Former chair, Australian Banana Industry Congress
- Finalist, Charlie Nastasi Horticultural Farmer of the Year

What is the Banana Imports Committee's purpose and goals?

The Committee works alongside the Australian Banana Growers' Council but is an entity in its own right.

It is currently focussed on mounting the industry's case against the potential import of bananas from the Philippines (the imports risk assessment is ongoing).

The BIC executive (Paul, ABGC chair Leon Collins and ABGC CEO Leanne Erakovic) form the core group of decision makers but also draw on relevant subject experts, solicitors, researchers and political advisors as needed. These external parties are carefully chosen and represent leaders in their fields, to ensure the Committee can make the best possible decisions for industry.

The committee welcomes thoughts, ideas and suggestions from growers and other industry stakeholders. Reach out to noimports@abgc.org.au

The Australian banana industry is free from many of the world's most devastating pests and diseases - BIC exists to help industry keep it that way.

REMINDER: THERE'S STILL TIME TO BACK THE BIFF!

Every grower has a stake in protecting our industry. The Banana Imports Fighting Fund (BIFF) is about backing strong, science-based biosecurity and making sure our voice is heard. The more growers who contribute, the stronger our position. If you haven't already, now's the time to get behind it. Visit abgc.org.au to find out more and sign up.

WHAT DOES AN IMPORT RISK ANALYSIS LOOK LIKE?

There are two types of import risk analyses: the standard import risk analysis (IRA) and the Biosecurity Import Risk Analysis (BIRA) process. At this stage, the request from the Philippines to import fresh bananas is progressing through the standard path but it could move to a BIRA, which has additional requirements, if deemed appropriate or it meets certain criteria.

Standard import risk analysis

The standard risk analysis involves the following steps:

	Current request: bananas from the Philippines	
	✓	Details and dates
Receive an import market access request.	✓	Fresh bananas were permitted to be imported from the Philippines in 2008. However, phytosanitary measures required haven't been possible to meet. A request to review alternate measures was received in 2018.
Prioritise the import market access request.	✓	
Announce the commencement of the import risk analysis and notify stakeholders.	✓	Growers and other industry stakeholders were publicly notified on 16 September 2025.
Publish an issues paper for public comment. This step is optional, and depends on the good being considered.		Expected in the first half of this year (2026).
Prepare a draft report after assessing the level of biosecurity risk and developing any proposed risk management measures.		
Publish the draft report for public consultation, which is generally for 60-calendar days. Stakeholders are notified and encouraged to provide feedback on the draft report. We meet with stakeholders in person and/or online during the consultation period, as required.		Expected in late 2025 or early 2026.
Consider all comments received and prepare the final report.		Dates are still TBC.
Publish the final report and notify stakeholders.		

PHILIPPINES VISIT MUST GO BEYOND 'BEST CASE' FARMS

Australian banana growers urged the Federal Government's technical team to look beyond carefully orchestrated farm tours during their visit to the Philippines, which was expected to take place in late March.

The visit will form part of the imports risk analysis currently under way to import fresh Cavendish bananas to Australia. The technical team assessed production practices on Filipino farms, to help decide whether the country can meet Australia's Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP).

The analysis is currently looking at three main pathogens: Moko, black Sigatoka and Banana Freckle. Australia is free from the first two diseases and has contained the third. In fact, Aussie growers - who supply every one of the bananas bought by consumers across the country - farm without many of the world's most devastating diseases.

Paul Inderbitzin, chair of the Banana Imports Committee, said that while the introduction of these diseases could devastate the industry, it's only scratching the surface.

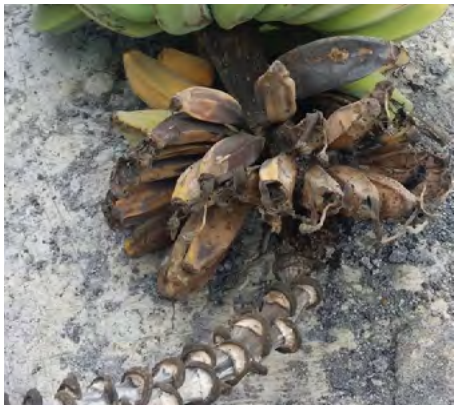
"We know - and I'm sure the technical team do too - that they'll only be shown the best of the best when they visit the Philippines. So how can we guarantee the same standards are met on all farms that may be interested in exporting to Australia?" he asked.

"Moko and Black sigatoka are just the tip of the iceberg. Try adding blood disease, banana skipper butterfly, and banana bract mosaic virus to the mix," he said. "There's more than enough risk to wipe out our healthy Australian industry."

"On top of that, you also need to consider hitchhiker pests or other diseases that could pose a huge threat to Australia's environment and broader agricultural industries."

The Banana Imports Committee welcomed the federal Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' decision to include a banana technical expert as part of the team headed to the Philippines, as well as a tropical plant pathologist with knowledge of banana diseases.

"That was a huge step in the right direction, but the reality is - regardless of what was on display as part of the technical visit - the risk is simply too great and impossible to guarantee."



All images of banana blood disease courtesy of Professor Andrè Drenth, University of Queensland.

It may take anywhere from 18 months to 3 years to complete a standard risk analysis, depending on its complexity.

Biosecurity Import Risk Analysis process

The BIRA process involves additional requirements to the standard import risk analysis process, including:

- appointment of the Scientific Advisory Group to examine and provide comment on any aspect of the BIRA
- issuing a notice of intention to conduct a BIRA
- publishing an issues paper before releasing a draft report
- publishing a provisional report before releasing the final report
- an option for stakeholders to request the Inspector-General of Biosecurity (IGB) to review the process for conducting the analysis.

These steps are prescribed under the Biosecurity Act 2015 and the Biosecurity Regulations 2016.

WORKING FOR MEMBERS: PROGRESS ON COMPLIANCE

ABGC continues to work actively in the compliance space, advocating for improvements that reduce unnecessary burden, improve consistency, and lower costs for banana growers, while still meeting market and food safety requirements.

Our focus remains on how the system can work better for growers. ABGC's work has included:

- Listening directly to grower members about on-farm audit challenges, including inconsistent interpretation, duplication of records, audit timing pressures and rising costs. You can view a copy of ABGC's submission to the Freshcare review by logging into the Members' Portal.
- Pushing for compliance to be on the national agenda across commodities through the NFF Horticulture Council.
- Driving and supporting initiatives to gather data that strengthen horticulture and banana specific advocacy.
- Advocating directly with policy makers including Members of Parliament.
- Engaging with Standard Owners, particularly Freshcare, to ensure grower experiences are informing system-level reviews and reforms.
- Direct engagement with Certification Bodies, including recent outreach to explore ways to reduce auditor travel and accommodation costs, particularly for growers in regional and remote banana-growing areas.
- At Congress last year, ABGC also met directly with the Freshcare Board to raise grower priorities. This was received well by Freshcare directors and solidified a positive working relationship.

ABGC membership is critical to supporting these activities. More work is under way and members can keep an eye on the Members' Portal for opportunities and updates.

Reach out

We'll keep members informed as this work progresses.
If you have questions or feedback on ABGC's advocacy relating to compliance or audits, please contact **members@abgc.org**. You can call Kathryn Dryden on **0455 553 596** if you'd prefer a conversation.

MEMBERS ONLY ALERT!

Our upcoming Workforce Workshop is exclusively for ABGC members. Full details will be shared directly with you soon, stay tuned!

GROWERS FACING A FAST-MOVING COST CRISIS

A rapid spike in key input costs is placing unprecedented pressure on banana growers and the supply chains that depend on them.

Rising fuel, freight and fertiliser costs have shifted from a pressure point to a genuine threat to farming futures and supply chain continuity.

As one grower put it: "This has moved from a cost pressure to a viability issue in a matter of weeks."

Costs climbing at speed

The scale and pace of increases are significant.

At the time of writing, fuel levies have risen to as high as 44.5% for some growers. Fertiliser prices have jumped by around $600 per tonne in just two weeks, increases of 30 to 50 per cent.

Freight and fuel costs are also spiking rapidly. One grower reported freight costs increasing by $5,000 in one week, followed by a further $35,000 the next. Fuel costs rose by $3,000 in one week and $8,000 the next.

"Costs are escalating faster than growers can respond or adapt," Kathryn Dryden, ABGC's Stakeholder and Engagement Manager, said.

"These on-farm examples are crucial to ensuring grower voices get cut-through at the highest levels.

"ABGC will continue to advocate on this issue and keep our members informed."

Few levers left to pull

It's not just about price, with access adding another layer of complexity.

Growers are reporting fuel purchasing limits of around 200 litres per day, restricted deliveries, and suppliers unable to meet demand. Even those who have invested in on-farm storage are struggling to secure supply.

Many growers are actively exploring the few options they have left, including rail freight, but with limited success. Cost savings have been minimal, and there is little capacity to absorb or offset the increases.

"Growers are being hit by multiple cost increases at once, with no ability to offset them," Kathryn noted.

"In some cases, the cost of transporting fruit now exceeds the return."

This issue extends well beyond the farm gate.

Around 95 per cent of Australia's bananas are grown in regional Far North Queensland and rely on long-distance freight to reach major markets like Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Bananas are a staple food, with Australians consuming around five million every day.

While this may currently present as a logistics and input cost issue, it has the potential to become a broader concern if left unaddressed.

"This is a live and fast-moving situation," Kathryn added. "Costs are rising week-on-week, supply constraints are tightening, and growers have limited ability to respond."

"ABGC Members, your support and feedback is critical to raising the profile of this issue.

"Thank you to those who have already answered calls and surveys. Keep that feedback coming, and we'll keep you informed as this issue continues to unfold."

> *While every effort is made to provide up-to-date information in this article, the nature of this issue is that it could change quickly. Keep an eye on ABGC and Member communications for detail.*

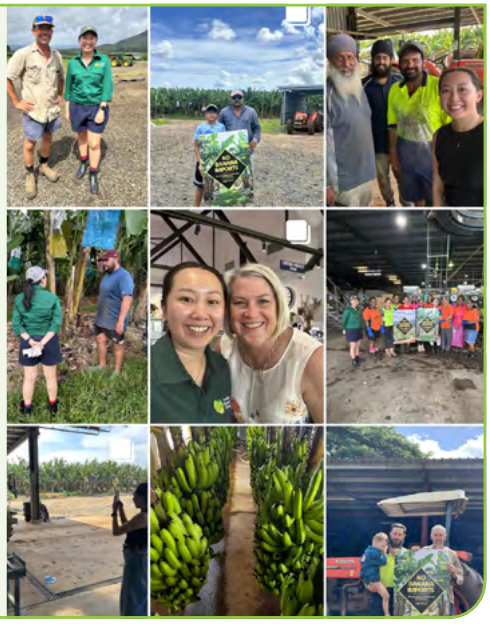
GET TO KNOW EMILY HOANG, OUR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

The Australian Banana Growers' Council is excited to officially welcome Emily to the team, and even more excited that she's already been out on farm meeting some ABGC members in Far North Queensland. She's put together a few words below:

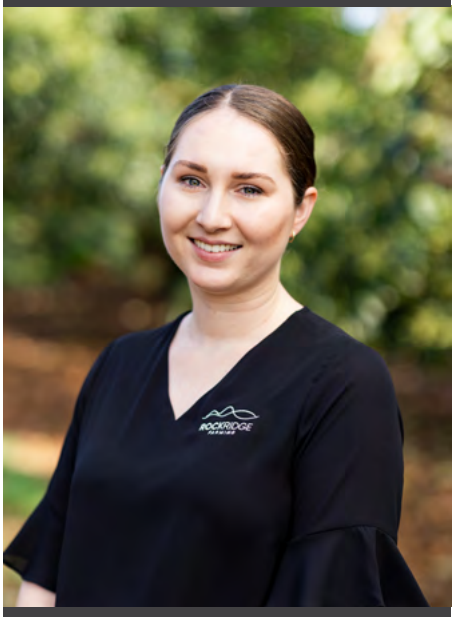
I wanted to share a bit about my background and why I'm so passionate about working in horticulture. I grew up in the Brisbane Markets working in my family business, which led me to complete a Bachelor of Agribusiness at the University of Queensland.

Since then, I've spent time across various farming businesses and most recently worked at the National Farmers' Federation. My passion for advocacy and young people also led me to co-found Young Horties, the first national network for young people in horticulture.

> *"What I hope to bring to ABGC is simple: strong relationships, clear communication and practical support that genuinely makes a difference"*




Tom Howe


Jess Leeming


David Howe

FARMING FAMILIES: ROCK RIDGE FARMING

By Skye Orsmond

In the rich soils of Far North Queensland's Tablelands, Rock Ridge Farming stands as a testament to what generational commitment, adaptability and passion can achieve. Built by Peter and Chelley Howe, the business has grown into a diverse and progressive farming operation, and now, the next generation is stepping into leadership.

Farming runs deep in the Howe family. Siblings Thomas, Jess and David represent the next chapter, each bringing their own skills, education and perspective to the operation. Together, they are carrying forward a proud family legacy, shaping the future of Rock Ridge while honouring the hard work and vision of those who came before them.

Across approximately 950 acres in Mareeba and Tolga, the family grows both Cavendish and Lady Finger bananas, alongside a significant avocado enterprise.

GROWING THE NEXT GENERATION

All three siblings took time to build skills beyond the farm gate before returning home, something the family sees as essential to long-term success.

Thomas completed an auto-electrical apprenticeship before returning in 2017, stepping into an Operations Manager role where he works closely with Peter on the day-to-day running of the business. He also oversees the Willows Road avocado orchard, managing everything from new plantings to ongoing maintenance.

Jess completed a Bachelor of Business before gaining experience in agribusiness lending, returning to the farm in 2019. While she hadn't always planned to come back, her career path helped shape the role she plays today.

"When I left school, I wasn't sure I would return to the family business," she explains. "I went on to study accounting at university and had a graduate role lined up with a large accounting firm. However, just before graduating, our bank manager told me about an Agribusiness Analyst role with NAB, which I decided to pursue."

Jess spent 18 months in the role, gaining valuable insight into agricultural businesses across the country. "It was a great experience and gave me exposure to the challenges and opportunities across the industry," she says. "But I found the corporate environment wasn't the right fit for me."

Her return to Rock Ridge came at a pivotal time for the business. "Mum and Dad had just installed a new Compac avocado grader and needed someone to take ownership of the grading software. I could see both the complexity and the opportunity, so I decided to come home and step into the business, working alongside my then-boyfriend, now husband, James."

As Operations Manager, Jess oversees office operations across safety, workforce management (including the PALM Scheme), data and reporting, policy, and continuous improvement initiatives. She led the business's successful application for Approved Employer status under the PALM Scheme in 2019, establishing a workforce model that has become pivotal to the business's ongoing success.

"Working in a family-run business has been incredibly rewarding," she says. "There's a real sense of purpose in contributing to something tangible, a business that supports our family and produces quality food for Australians."

With their young son Andy already part of farm life, the fifth generation is waiting in the wings, something Jess values deeply. "I really appreciate the flexibility the business provides, especially with a young family, and the opportunity to be involved across all areas of the operation."

David joined the business in 2022 after qualifying as a diesel mechanic, bringing valuable hands-on experience gained during his apprenticeship in Mareeba, where he worked across a range of farms and machinery.

"Even when I was at school, I always wanted to come back to the farm," he says. "There was an expectation that we'd all go to university or do a trade, so we had something to bring back, and something to fall back on."

With a natural affinity for machinery and a passion for developing farmland for new plantings, David quickly found his place within the operation. Today, he

follows closely in his father's footsteps, spreading himself equally over the banana and avocado farms.

"I enjoy that you're always doing something new and challenging yourself. There's a real variety in the work, and you're outdoors," he says. "Every day is different."

His mechanical background has proven particularly valuable on farm. "If something breaks down while we're out spraying or working, I can usually fix it on the spot, rather than waiting on someone else," he explains. "It keeps things moving."

He is also developing his knowledge of banana production by working one day each week with long-serving team member David Ruiz, General Manager of Bananas.

"I like working across everything and seeing what's happening across the farms," he says. "I've only been back for four or five years, so I'm continuing to grow my knowledge and understanding."

It's clear that decisions on succession and strategic business planning have helped Peter and Chelley Howe enable their children, and their families, to return to the family business. "Succession is something we've built into the business from the ground up, both operationally and legally. We've structured things so the business could one day be split into three, depending on what our kids decide to do in the future. At the same time, as farming becomes more complex, we make a point of recognising people's strengths – for example, James (Jess's husband), whose background in electrical work and wind turbines adds real value – and strategically placing them in roles that maximise their value to the business while continuing to invest in their development," said Peter Howe.

EXPERIENCE MEETS INNOVATION

At Rock Ridge, generational transition isn't just about succession, it's about combining experience with fresh thinking. The next generation benefits from decades of knowledge within the team, while also bringing new ideas shaped by education and external experience.

Biosecurity sits at the core of the operation, with farm layouts and access carefully planned to minimise risk. Attention to detail extends to production practices as well. On the Tablelands, where bananas are more prone to curling, the team uses protective slips on bunches to reduce damage and maintain fruit quality. While this adds to labour and material costs, the slips are reusable and play an important role in delivering premium fruit to market.

Even small operational decisions reflect a focus on worker wellbeing and efficiency. For example, the team uses spades instead of knives for de-handing, reducing the risk of cuts and repetitive strain injuries while maintaining productivity.

LOOKING AHEAD

For Thomas, Jess and David, the future of farming is both a challenge and an opportunity. With climate variability, market pressures and evolving technology shaping the industry, their combined skills position them well to adapt and grow.

Backed by the knowledge of previous generations and supported by a strong team, they are committed to continuing the Rock Ridge legacy, producing high-quality bananas and avocados for Australian consumers while building a sustainable future for those who follow.

DAVID RUIZ: 26 YEARS OF DEDICATION

A key figure in Rock Ridge's banana operation is David Ruiz, whose 26-year journey with the Howe family reflects loyalty, hard work and deep industry knowledge.

Starting out in de-handing, David quickly proved his commitment. After hours, he would put himself forward for extra tasks like desuckering, determined to learn every aspect of the job.

"Once I'd proved myself, I went on to the bagging machine," he recalls.

From those early days, David worked his way through the ranks to become General Manager of Bananas. Today, he has mastered all in-field roles, giving him a comprehensive understanding of the operation.

For David, the evolution of Rock Ridge has been one of the most rewarding parts of his career.

"It's great working for a family who have evolved so much in the industry. They're very passionate about what they do and committed to growing quality produce," he says.

Peter and Chelley Howe appreciate and acknowledge the impact and contributions that David has made to their business.

"David Ruiz is considered part of the family. Rock Ridge simply wouldn't be what it is today without David's expertise. We rely heavily on his input for all important decisions within our business, and I'm glad that my kids get to learn from him," said Peter.

"The thing about farming is it's about experience and learning," David says.

Reflecting on the growth of the business, he adds: "I've never seen anyone build a farm like Peter. It takes years to do, and it's due to the Howe family's commitment that it's the fine-tuned operation it is today."

A succession plan for David's role is also on the cards, with Peter commenting that "I often joke with David about when we can start training his 10-year-old son, Lucas, to take over his dad's role one day."

His story is a powerful reminder that while farming is often about family, it is equally built on the dedication of long-term team members who help shape a business over decades.

CARNARVON COPPING EXTREMES

Banana growers in Carnarvon have been dealt some severe blows from Mother Nature already this year, with the growing region reporting up to 40-50% crop loss from ex-Tropical Cyclone Mitchell in February.

Extreme heatwaves preceded the cyclone, with top temperatures of 49 degrees reported to be "cooking" fruit and plants.

At the time of going to print, Tropical Cyclone Narelle was again strengthening off the Western Australian coast and threatening a third landfall, with Bureau of Meteorology track maps showing it travelling at least close Carnarvon, if not worse.

Obviously weather systems can change quickly, but our thoughts are with the banana growing community in Western Australia as they take stock from the earlier events and prepare to potentially face a third.

Keep an eye on ABGC communications channels for more as it comes to hand.

Courtesy of Doriana Mangili, Sweeter Banana Cooperative

FNQ RECOVERY GRANTS AVAILABLE

If you've been impacted by severe weather in Far North Queensland over the past 18 months, you might be eligible for a grant to help you get back to business.

Exceptional Disaster Assistance Recovery Grants of up to $75,000 are available for affected producers following the North and Far North Tropical Low (29 January – 28 February 2025). Applications for these grants have been extended to 14 August 2026.

In addition, growers affected by severe weather since 24 December 2025 – including the monsoon trough, Cyclone Koji and Cyclone Narelle – are also eligible for grants of up to $75,000. Applications close 6 January 2027 or when funding is fully committed.

Growers should visit QRIDA (**qrida.qld.gov.au**) to check eligibility. You can also contact QRIDA's Far North Regional Area Manager, Sam Spina, to discuss your application. Call **0429 497 757** or email **sam.spina@qrida.qld.gov.au**

FAREWELLING INDUSTRY GREATS

The banana industry has already said farewell to a strong advocate and an internationally-recognised researcher this year. As industry faces another imports threat, their efforts and impact are remembered.

RON BOSWELL

Alongside former ABGC Chair and Tully grower Len Collins, Ron Boswell used his influence to demand transparency, establish senate inquiries and ensure biosecurity decisions were tested against science.

DR DAVID JONES

Dr David Jones brought his internationally recognised perspective on many banana diseases to the 'No Banana Imports' campaign in the early 2000s. David trained in all aspects of plant pathology, especially plant quarantine, and was editor of Diseases of Banana, Abacá and Enset, which is considered a leading text on banana pathogens and disorders.

INDUSTRY-FUNDED ACTION ON CROP PROTECTION

Information provided by Hort Innovation

Access to crop protection products is becoming more complicated and challenging for Australian banana growers.

It's a trend being felt across all of horticulture, driven by health and safety of people and the environment, tighter regulations, increasing data requirements, and growing global scrutiny of agrichemicals. There's no silver bullet here, and solutions are taking more time and requiring more evidence and investment than ever before.

What's happening right now in bananas

There is a significant amount of work under way to protect and expand crop protection options for the banana industry.

Some key projects include:

- Spider mite control - work is progressing to support a label addition or permit, with trials being developed and a target low withholding period.
- Thrips and caterpillar pests - insecticide trials are underway (including bell injection and bunch spray methods) targeting banana scab moth, flower thrips and rust thrips.
- New chemistry opportunities - AgVet grant applications have been submitted for several actives targeting rust thrips, flower thrips, spider mites and other pests. Successful applications will be advised by June 2026.
- Exploring alternative approaches - research is also looking at new use patterns, biologicals and even unregistered options (such as sodium hypochlorite for sooty blotch) to expand the toolbox.

Not every idea progresses. For example, work on sulphur and talc for thrips control was halted following negative industry feedback. This feedback is critical as it ensures investment is focused on solutions that are practical and effective on-farm.

The role of minor use permits

As bananas are classified as a major crop, access to chemicals through the minor use program is becoming increasingly difficult.

Minor use permits are for minor use situations where no relevant registered products or use patterns exist and registering the use pattern would not produce sufficient economic return.

Even though bananas are a major crop, certain uses within bananas can still qualify as "minor use", like infrequent use of a product for the control of a minor pest or disease or use of a product for the control of a minor pest or disease where the use is restricted to a small proportion of the crop

Minor use permits are not easy to secure, nor are they a long-term option. The process is detailed and evidence-heavy.

Applications must demonstrate:

- Scale of use (area treated, amount of product used)
- a genuine industry need
- lack of suitable alternatives
- limited or specific use patterns
- problem distribution and frequency

Approvals can take 8–12 months, sometimes much longer, especially where new trial data is required. On top of this, renewals are not guaranteed. Increasingly, regulators are asking for more granular data, down to grower numbers or product sales data, to prove a use is truly 'minor'.

The cost of keeping products available

Generating the data needed to support permits or label extensions isn't cheap.

This is where AgVet grants play an important role. These grants help fund efficacy and residue trials, which are essential for both new permits and maintaining existing ones.

However, there are no guarantees that applications will be successful as the process is very competitive. The grants often don't cover the full cost of required trials. That means industry investment is often still needed to get outcomes across the line.

Identifying gaps before they become problems

Another key tool is Hort Innovation's Strategic Agrichemical Review Process (SARP).

SARPs take a step back and look at the full picture, identifying:

- key pest, weed and disease priorities
- gaps in current control options
- potential future risks to existing chemicals
- and opportunities for new or alternative solutions

For growers, this work is important because it helps flag issues early - before a chemical is lost or a pest becomes harder to control.

Regulatory demands are increasing, and access to crop protection products is likely to become more constrained over time.

A range of opportunities for investment are being explored including new technologies and biologicals; improved integrated pest and disease management (IPDM); and better ways to support ongoing access to key products.

It's a complex and ever-changing space, and one in which industry, Hort Innovation and other stakeholders must work collaboratively to achieve practical outcomes.

Bagging practices can influence bunch pest control.

Testing changes on a small scale is crucial for understanding their impact on bunch pest control and business operations on your farm.

Bell injection – Timing, volume and injection position are important for control of scab moth and flower thrips.

BUNCH PEST MANAGEMENT: TOP TIPS AND TIMELY REMINDERS

By Tegan Cavallaro on behalf of the DPI Banana Extension team

Banana bunch pests, including vertebrate pests (e.g. birds and bats), insects (e.g. banana rust thrips, banana flower thrips, banana scab moth) and fruit fungal diseases (e.g. sooty blotch and fruit speckle), all impact fruit quality and can increase on-farm waste, ultimately impacting your bottom line. Hot, wet, humid conditions and fast plant growth can make managing these pests a challenge.

Effective bunch pest management involves a combination of strategies, including bell injection, bagging, bunch spraying, and ground or stem applications, with pesticide resistance management carefully considered across these practices.

Bell injection

- Timing of bell injection in the upright position is crucial, particularly for scab moth control. At this time of year when plants are growing quickly, aim to target upright bells by injecting blocks every 3–4 days before they tip over.
- Volume of bell injection is important, especially for flower thrips control.
- Injection position - Correct position of the bell injection is in the top half to one third of the bell just below the swelling point.

Bagging

- Timing – For growers with bird and bat pressure, early bagging (bells) with either a bag or liner significantly reduces scratching and also reduces rust thrips damage.
- Tying method – Leaving a hole or 'flue' in the top of the bunch cover is thought to increase air flow through the bag and help reduce fruit speckle (however it is not a sufficient treatment on its own).
- Type of bag – Paper bunch covers may reduce fruit fungal issues, trial results are promising but not conclusive and may vary depending on disease pressure.

Bunch spraying

- Coverage – Current registered chemicals require good coverage to be effective.
- Equipment – A range of equipment is used to apply bunch sprays and both air assisted and hydraulic options can provide good coverage.
- Training – Staff training is critical to ensure good coverage and correct volume is constantly applied to bunches.
- Continual improvement – Growers and commercial providers continue to innovate their spray systems to achieve good coverage in a timely and effective way.

Ground and stem application

- Chemical control for rust thrips can be directed at soil dwelling pupae and adults and larvae on the plant to reduce population levels.
- Timing – consider timing applications ahead of peak insect pressure. Ground sprays may take 6-7 weeks compared to stem treatments (2-3 weeks) before full effects are observed on rust thrips populations.

Resistance management

- There are limited chemical actives available to control bunch pests so chemical stewardship is IMPORTANT! Repeated use of chemicals with the same mode of action, mixing of insecticides and or/application of sub-lethal doses can increase the risk of resistance developing.

Chemical reminders

- Always check product labels as formulations can differ in mixing and application rates.
- If using spinetoram, the mixing rate on the permit (PER87198) for bell injection differs from the label rate for bunch spraying.
- Group 4A chemicals (e.g. imidacloprid) can lead to mite flares. Limit the use of these chemicals at times of the year when environmental conditions are favourable to mite flares (e.g. hot dry periods).
- Mixing products with different modes of action is not recommended and limits options for rotation to manage resistance.
- Regularly calibrate equipment and check application techniques.
- Check labels for storage and mixing requirements.
- It's important to always follow label instructions. Off-label use can be unsafe for workers and crops, ineffective, and may breach legal regulations. ▶

Tips for trialling changes to bunch pest management practices

Every farm has different pest pressures and challenges, and minor adjustments to bunch pest management practices at various times of the year can affect control. Trialling changes to your bunch pest management practices on your farm is a valuable way to evaluate their benefits and/or drawbacks and can guide broader implementation across your farm.

- Make only one change at a time - bunches with a modified practice can be referred to as test bunches.
- Always include your existing pest management practices for comparison (control bunches).
- Treat your test bunches and control bunches at the same time, this helps account for changes in environmental conditions and/or pest pressure.
- Choose an area on the farm that is most susceptible to the pest you aim to manage more effectively (e.g. an area near vegetation that is more prone to banana scab moth).
- Determine how you are going to assess the bunches to evaluate if the practice has improved control of the target pest, disease or issue.
- Consider how the time of the year and environmental conditions may impact what you observed in your on-farm trial.

If you would like assistance with your bunch pest management and/or with conducting your own trial, contact the DPI banana extension team (Tegan Cavallaro **0459 846 053** or Ingrid Jenkins **0497 801 980**).

This article has been written as part of the National Banana Development and Extension Program (BA25001). This program is funded by Hort Innovation, using the banana industry research and development levies, co-investment from the Department of Primary Industries and contributions from the Australian Government.
Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian horticulture.

Hort Innovation BANANA FUND

Queensland Government

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BRING A NEW CHEMICAL TO MARKET?

KEY STEPS

1. A novel product needs to be identified that has the potential to be efficacious and safe for use on bananas. It could be already registered for another crop or a completely new active. This can take years to develop.
2. Once a novel product is identified, the chemical company needs to be supportive of working with the banana industry to bring a new product to market. The potential market is relatively small and therefore doesn't, on its own, offer good return on investment.
3. If this can be overcome, a full suite of efficacy and residue trials is required on bananas. Trials must be conducted by an independent testing company across multiple seasons and geographical regions. There is a shortage of chemical testing companies in Australia. This step can also take years.
4. Upon completion, the product must be registered through the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicines Authority and may take a couple of years to complete.
5. The product can be released to growers.

COSTS INVOLVED – TIME AND MONEY

For chemical companies, identifying and bringing a new, innovative crop protection chemical to market, costs over US$286 million (approximately AUD$430m+) and takes about 11 years of research and development. This is driven by strict regulatory, safety, and environmental data requirements, all of which require comprehensive and varied trials.

Regulatory compliance is a significant contributor to the cost, with APVMA registration fees ranging from thousands to over a hundred thousand dollars depending on the application complexity.

THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN BANANA GROWERS' COUNCIL (ABGC)

What ABGC can do:

- Support and advocate for new crop protection tools.
- Highlight the industry's crop protection gaps with chemical companies.
- Support registration by assisting chemical testing companies find appropriate trials sites on banana farms.
- Raise awareness around the changing crop protection landscape, highlighting its impact on growers, the fruit they produce and what it means for the supply chain.
- Work collaboratively with Government, chemical companies and funding bodies to find ways to support growers.
- Provide accurate information to the APVMA on behalf of industry when chemistries are being reviewed, as was done with chlorpyrifos and omethoate (folimat).

ABGC recognises that options for growers in this space are decreasing. It's an issue across many industries and the stark reality is shared: farmers cannot continue to produce the same quality and quantity of produce without solutions or serious, systematic changes.

What ABGC can't do:

- Bring back chemistries that have been cancelled or stop APVMA from reviewing chemistries.
- Solely fund or develop a new novel product, noting the timeframes, significant costs and resources involved.
- Bring new crop protection products to banana growers without the support of chemical companies. Most chemical companies are multinationals and make decisions on how best to obtain return on their investment for bringing new compounds to market.

At this time, existing trials and efforts to obtain new label registrations through AgVet forum grants or co-fund through our R&D levy with other industries represent the best option for industry.

POST-ENTRY QUARANTINE SERVICES FOR BANANA PLANTS

Keeping exotic banana pests and pathogens out of Australia is crucial for protecting farms and the wider industry. That's why every imported banana plant goes through strict PEQ screening, including tissue culture, greenhouse checks and diagnostic testing (Figure 1).

From April 2026, Agriculture Victoria's AgriBio centre will become the sole provider of tissue-culturing services for new banana plant imports entering the PEQ process. This is the next step in shifting banana PEQ services from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QLD DPI) to new, long-term providers.

This is Phase 2 of a three stage transition program, which is underpinned by comprehensive training and skills transfer.

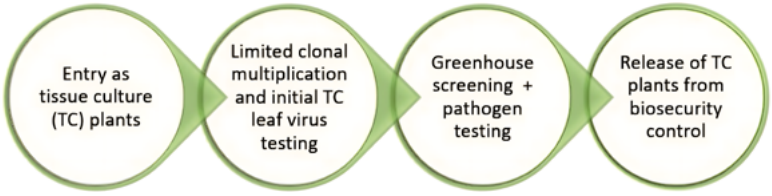
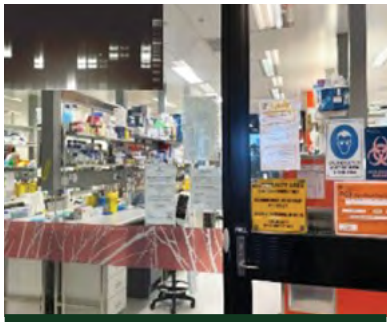


Figure 1. The banana post-entry quarantine process

1. PEQ Tissue Culture (AgriBio)

2. PEQ Greenhouse (Mickleham)



3. PEQ Diagnostics (QLD DPI)

- Phase 1 wrapped up in December 2023, when greenhouse services moved from QLD DPI to the federal Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) in Mickleham.
- Phase 3 is the transfer of diagnostics from QLD DPI to DAFF Mickleham. Technical discussions and knowledge sharing have been underway since the start of the transition and will progress further in 2027. In the meantime, QLD DPI will continue to provide diagnostics services for banana viruses and phytoplasma species.
- The transition began in 2022, and has involved QLD DPI, DAFF, Agriculture Victoria, Hort Innovation and the Australian Banana Growers' Council working together to secure reliable, futureproof PEQ services. Their goal is simple: keep banana plant imports moving while maintaining the strong biosecurity safeguards Australian banana growers rely on.
- DAFF is separately reviewing the import conditions for banana nursery stock to ensure they are up-to-date and responsive to any new or emerging risks. They expect to release the draft recommendations of the review in late 2026 for stakeholder consultation.

If you're interested in importing banana plants, you can get more information by emailing **Imports@aff.gov.au** (DAFF) or checking BICON.

Read more about the transition of banana PEQ services via the QR code

Funding acknowledgement

The banana PEQ Transition is a component of Project BA21002 - New varieties for Australian banana growers, which is funded by Hort Innovation, using the banana industry research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government and the Queensland Government (Department of Primary Industries). The transition has been further supported by the Australian Government (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry) and Victorian Government (Agriculture Victoria).

FIGHTING TR4: HOW GENETIC RESISTANCE CAN SECURE THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN BANANAS

By Dr Andrew Chen and Prof. Elizabeth Aitken
School of Agriculture and Food Sustainability,
The University of Queensland.

Fusarium wilt Tropical Race 4 (TR4) remains the most serious long-term threat to banana production in Australia and around the globe. Once the fungus becomes established in soil, it is virtually impossible to eradicate. It can survive for decades as a saprophyte (living on dead or decaying organic matter) or as resting spores in the soil. It can be spread easily on soil, water and machinery, and there are no chemical treatments capable of controlling it effectively in the field.

For Australian growers, this presents a stark reality. Cavendish bananas account for around 95% of national production and underpin an industry worth more than $600 million annually. Cavendish itself was adopted last century as a replacement for Gros Michel, which was decimated by another specialised form of the fungus, namely the banana-infecting Race 1 strains of Fusarium oxysporum. Today, Cavendish faces the same threat from TR4.

Farm hygiene and strict biosecurity measures remain essential to slow disease spread, but they cannot provide a permanent solution. In the long term, the most sustainable way to manage TR4 will be through genetic resistance in the banana plant itself.

Learning from wild bananas

While Cavendish is highly susceptible to TR4, natural resistance has not been found in this banana group. Wild seeded banana plants, particularly diploid forms of Musa acuminata, have evolved natural resistance to Fusarium wilt. These plants are not suitable for direct commercial use, as they produce seeded fruit and lack many agronomic traits required for production, but they represent an invaluable source of resistance genes.

Modern banana breeding aims to transfer these resistance traits into commercially acceptable, seedless bananas without compromising yield or fruit quality. To do this efficiently, breeders need to know exactly where resistance is located in the banana genome and how it is inherited. This is where molecular genetics becomes a powerful tool.

A close-up image showing rhizome discolouration in one of the lines compared with the uninoculated control. Photo: Dr Andrew Chen.

From field trials to DNA markers

In earlier research at the University of Queensland, supported by the Banana R&D levy fund and by the Gates Foundation through the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, UQ researchers were able to compare the DNA of resistant and susceptible plants. This was done through crossing resistant and susceptible plants and screening their offspring for disease response.

This work led to the identification of a resistance region on chromosome 3 of the banana genome. A molecular marker linked to this resistance was then developed, allowing banana breeders to identify resistant plants grown in the field without waiting for long periods of time for potential disease symptoms to appear.

This marker is now being used by international banana breeding programs in Brazil, Africa and Europe, demonstrating the global impact of Australian banana research, and has enhanced the collaboration and potential access to these global programs.

However, an important question remained unanswered: is this the only source of resistance, or are there others?

Professor Elizabeth Aitken and Dr Andrew Chen with tissue culture banana plants grown by crossing Calcutta 4 with a susceptible banana subspecies.
Photo credit: The University of Queensland.

Why multiple resistance sources matter

Relying on a single resistance gene carries risk. Pathogens can adapt over time, and resistance that depends on one genetic mechanism may eventually be overcome. Combining resistance from multiple genetic sources, known as pyramiding, offers a more durable and resilient solution. To explore this, researchers at UQ - supported by the Australian banana

Generations of Calcutta 4 crosses were grown to identify STR4 resistance was carried in chromosome 5.
Photo credit: Professor Elizabeth Aitken.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GROWERS

This research does not deliver a new resistant variety overnight, but it strengthens the pathway toward one. By identifying multiple, genetically distinct sources of resistance and developing tools to track them, breeders can make faster, more informed decisions and reduce reliance on long, costly field trials.

The ultimate goal is to develop banana varieties that combine high yield, fruit quality and strong resistance to TR4 - varieties that can be grown with confidence in the long term.

industry's R&D levy fund - have turned their attention to other wild banana lines that had previously shown resistance to TR4. One of the most promising of these is Calcutta 4 (Musa acuminata spp. burmannica), a diploid banana that has been studied for decades but whose resistance genetics were poorly understood.

A new resistance region discovered

Calcutta 4 was crossed with a susceptible banana line to produce offspring that varied in their response to Fusarium wilt. Some plants remained healthy, while others showed severe symptoms. This clear separation suggested that resistance in Calcutta 4 was inherited and could be genetically mapped.

By analysing the DNA of highly resistant and highly susceptible plants, researchers identified a previously unknown resistance region on chromosome 5. This finding was significant for two reasons. First, it confirmed that Calcutta 4 carries a genetically distinct form of resistance. Second, because this resistance is located on a different chromosome to the Malaccensis resistance, the two can potentially be combined in future breeding programs.

This discovery represents the first time the genetic location of Subtropical Race 4 (STR4) resistance in Calcutta 4 has been identified. Subtropical Race 4 (STR4) is a form of Race 4 that can infect Cavendish in cooler, subtropical growing regions. Encouragingly, we are now making good progress toward identifying the resistance trait to TR4 found in the wild banana Calcutta 4.

Working around biosecurity constraints

Due to strict biosecurity regulations, TR4 resistance cannot be tested in Queensland with the live pathogen. To overcome this limitation, disease screening was carried out in collaboration with international partners, including the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Tissue-cultured plants were carefully transported to South Africa under quarantine permits and assessed there under controlled conditions.

Although this added logistical complexity and time, the collaboration allowed Australian researchers to continue making progress while maintaining Australia's strong biosecurity standards.

Further work is now under way to refine the chromosome 5 resistance region and develop a molecular marker similar to the one already in use for Malaccensis. Additional resistant wild banana lines are also being explored, with early results suggesting that more resistance sources may yet be found.

For growers, this research represents an investment in the future. History has shown the consequences of relying too heavily on a single susceptible banana cultivar. By broadening the genetic base of resistance and applying modern breeding tools, the banana industry can reduce its vulnerability to TR4 and build long-term resilience.

Genetic resistance is not a quick fix, but it is the most reliable solution available. Continued research, combined with strong biosecurity and industry engagement, offers the best chance of ensuring that bananas remain a viable and profitable crop in Australia for generations to come.

Acknowledgement

This work is supported by Hort Innovation under grants BA21000 and BA24004, using the banana research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government. Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian Horticulture.

Calcutta 4 pot trial in the glasshouse. Photo credit: Dr Andrew Chen.

PEST SURVEILLANCE AND GROWER ENGAGEMENT SNAPSHOT

By Grant Telford, Project Leader

The Hort Innovation 'Enhancing pest surveillance, grower engagement and banana biosecurity resilience' Project continues to deliver results to support Australian banana growers.

This new project (BA24003) commenced in April 2025 and deals with Banana Bunchy Top Virus (BBTV) control and containment, and the prevention and management of endemic banana pests and diseases in North Queensland - specifically banana leaf diseases and on-farm biosecurity preparedness.

Managed by ABGC, the project continues to focus on industry capability building and grower resource development to minimise biosecurity impacts. The project also conducts routine biosecurity inspection, surveillance and control activities.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Banana Bunchy Top control and containment (2025/26 at 31 Jan 2026)

	Northern NSW	South East QLD
Containment status	Remains CONTAINED within the established control zone	Remains CONTAINED within the established control zone
Number of farms visits conducted	307	35
Number of infected commercial banana plants identified and destroyed	1039	51
Number of residential visits conducted	20	17
Number of residential infected banana plants identified and destroyed	78	38
Grower participation during visits	68%	66%
Inspectors employed (full or part time)	2	1

Leaf spot inspections and on-farm biosecurity preparedness in North Queensland (1 April 2025 to 31 Jan 2026)

Number of farms visits conducted to assess Yellow Sigatoka levels against industry standards	525
Number of properties found compliant on their first visit	453
Number of properties found to be not compliant requiring advice and a second visit	71
Number of properties found to be not compliant requiring advice and a third visit	1
On farm biosecurity preparedness	Production areas continue to show general maintenance or improvement in biosecurity preparedness with project support. Growers in the Tablelands show the highest levels of on-farm biosecurity adoption. Other growing districts still show room for improvement.
Inspectors employed (full or part time)	1

MAJOR PESTS AT A GLANCE

The project has developed a new 'shed poster' to alert Australian Banana growers of significant endemic banana pests that could impact production, and exotic pests that could compromise Australia's clean green status. All growers are encouraged to download the poster and place it in a prominent place in their packing sheds. The best defence against serious endemic and exotic pests is early detection and reporting. Visit abgc.org.au to download your copy or request a copy be sent to you. You'll find the link on the homepage or under the 'Resources' tab.

IN-FIELD TEST FOR BUNCHY TOP BEING COMMERCIALISED

Like a COVID test, but for the banana virus

ABGC bunchy top inspectors engaged as part of the Hort Innovation BA24003 project have played an important role in facilitating the development of an in-field diagnostic test for BBTV. The virus almost destroyed the Australian industry in the 1920s and has been kept in check since then thanks to the vigilance of banana inspectors and growers, combined with state government regulations.

As part of a Gates Foundation-funded project, University of Queensland plant pathologists A/Prof John Thomas, Dr Megan Vance and Dr Nga Tran have developed a simple in-field diagnostic test (lateral flow assay) for BBTV, along the lines of those used for Covid. The test is now being commercialised through a European diagnostics company to facilitate its worldwide distribution. This test will not replace visual surveillance by the inspectors but rather allow on the spot confirmation of infection, if required. It will also be a valuable aid for biosecurity surveys.

These diagnostic reagents have also played an important role in a collaborative project on the epidemiology of BBTV (Hort Innovation project BA19002), led by Dr Kathy Crew in the Department of Primary Industries. This project investigated the detection and spread of the virus in the field, to assist in the development of computer modelling as a guide to efficient disease control.

Underlying all this research, and essential to its success, has been ongoing collaboration with the ABGC inspectors to identify appropriate field sites and the location of infected banana plants.

Prof John Thomas, from the University of Queensland, in the field.

NEW RESOURCES TO UNDERSTAND AND DEAL WITH BUNCHY TOP

The project continues to develop resources aimed at informing and educating commercial growers and residents on Bunchy Top identification and control. Two new video shorts have been produced under the project to support this:

- Bunchy Top Tips: Manual destruction (of infected plants); and
- Bunchy Top Tips: Banana aphid - a Bunchy Top vector.

If you are not aware of video resources provided by the ABGC, you can search for @australianbananagrowers on YouTube, or scan the QR code to head straight to the Bunchy Top playlist.

ABGC WELCOMES TRAINEE BUNCHY TOP INSPECTOR

In March this year, the ABGC sought to increase its support to NSW banana growers by recruiting a new trainee inspector to the Bunchy Top team. Banana growers in the NSW Bunchy Top Control Zone would be familiar with both Josh Chapman and Amardeep Singh.

As inspectors, Josh and Amardeep have been crucial to supporting growers in Bunchy Top control and containment – and they'll be instrumental in training the team's newest addition. Matt Southon will benefit from their years of experience in supporting growers, but also brings a strong horticultural background of his own, having worked in wholesale production nurseries. If you see Matt, please feel free to say hello!

Matt Southon.

PRE-COMMERCIALISATION VARIETY TRIALS HIGHLIGHT POTENTIAL FOR NEW SOUTH WALES GROWERS

By Ingrid Jenkins on behalf of the DPI Banana Extension Team

New South Wales banana growers are working with researchers to find solutions for farming with Fusarium wilt, a devastating disease that is impacting production of popular banana varieties.

As part of the Hort Innovation levy funded project BA21002: New varieties for Australian banana growers, led by Queensland's Department of Primary Industries, six growers in the state are growing disease resistant varieties. These pre-commercialisation trials aim to identify varieties that not only withstand the disease but also meet the demands of growers, supply chains, and consumers, offering potential alternatives for the future of Australia's subtropical banana industry.

Understanding pre-commercialisation trials

The trials will provide important data about potentially useful varieties under commercial production practices. The collected data is observational in nature, based around the opinions and perceptions of the performance of these varieties by the participating growers, rather than collected measurements like bunch weights and plant cycle times. The trials will also provide small volumes of packed fruit to test the performance of the variety in the supply chain and for consumer acceptability. The network of pre-commercialisation trials in the subtropics and tropics aims to cover the range of typical soil types and climates used for banana production, to account for these influences on variety performance.

Given the severe problems growers have with Fusarium wilt affecting Lady Fingers and Ducasse, it is no surprise that many growers would like to evaluate these varieties. However, it's important that pre-commercialisation trials are undertaken first to determine their suitability and acceptability before varieties are made more widely available through commercialisation. Varieties being trialled are owned either by overseas banana breeding programs or Queensland's Department of Primary Industries, and have been provided in the first instance for research and development purposes only. Once a variety performs successfully in the field, the supply chain and the market, it can then be considered for commercialisation, which would involve negotiations with representatives of the respective breeding programs.

Addressing a growing challenge

These trials are part of a broader effort to future-proof Australia's banana industry against the growing threat of Fusarium wilt. Sites are also established in Far North Queensland at Tully and Mareeba, looking at both Cavendish and non-Cavendish varieties.

For the sub-tropical banana industry in New South Wales, these trials are very important. Fusarium wilt race 1, along with other strains of the disease, affects Lady Finger and Ducasse bananas. Both race 1 and subtropical race 4 are posing an increasing challenge to the production of these varieties as the pathogens continue to spread across NSW banana-growing regions.

Collaboration with growers

Banana growers like Michael Singh are playing a key role in evaluating the performance of these new varieties under commercial conditions. Michael grows Dwarf Rossi (a dwarf Lady Finger cultivar) and Ducasse varieties and explains why he wanted to contribute to this important research: 'It's very prominent that Panama race 1 is now spread across the Coffs Harbour region. Hopefully with these trials, these resistant varieties can provide hope for future farming,' Michael said.

Stewart Lindsay from Queensland's Department of Primary Industries leads the pre-commercialisation activities for the project. He notes that this phase of variety development is important in assessing the suitability of varieties: "Having grower collaboration and contributions to variety screening work is crucial. Initial screening is undertaken on research facilities. We then need to ground truth promising varieties under commercial growing conditions.

"Getting the growers' feedback on performance and aspects regarding their management is critical in determining a variety's suitability for commercialisation. We are grateful for the growers' contribution and support for this work."

Protecting plant breeding rights

To ensure the success and integrity of these trials, varieties are distributed under Material Transfer Agreements (MTAs). The project has distributed varieties under MTAs to six collaborating NSW growers, one in the Macksville area, two in Coffs Harbour and three in the Tweed region. These agreements play a crucial role in protecting the intellectual property of the institutions that developed these varieties. They ensure that the planting material is used responsibly, preventing unauthorised propagation and outlining clear terms for its use within a specific timeframe.

NSW banana grower Michael Singh with Stewart Lindsay (QDPI) receiving QBAN tissue culture plantlets.

Ripened fruit of JV42.41.

Bunches of Goldfinger mutagenesis selection 544 coming through packing shed at Mareeba trial site.

Promising varieties

Varieties distributed in February to cooperating growers include the Lady Finger hybrid, JV 42.41 and the Silk hybrid Princesa, both from Brazil and both with resistance to Fusarium wilt race 1. Growers also received four of the best tasting improved Goldfinger selections from mutagenesis, developed by Queensland's Department of Primary Industries.

"These varieties are suited as alternatives for the Lady Finger market rather than Cavendish," Stewart said.

"The JV 42.41 and the four improved Goldfinger selections are all hybrids of Lady Finger with demonstrated resistance to Panama disease Race 1, while Princesa is a hybrid of the Silk variety also with good resistance.

"A range of consumer acceptability and taste testing has been carried out on these varieties with positive results. This is the first time that I can recall where we have commercially useful resistance to Panama disease Race 1 in varieties that have rated well in taste tests, which is why these particular varieties have progressed to the pre-commercialisation trial phase.

"However, none of these varieties is perfect and the pre-commercialisation trials are the best way to gather feedback on the agronomic traits that might be deal breakers for future commercialisation."

What's Next for the Trials?

Feedback from growers on the production and performance of these varieties is expected in 18–24 months, once the harvest of the plant crop is completed.

Princesa first ratoon plant at Mareeba trial site.

Funding acknowledgement

The pre-commercialisation activities are funded as part of the project New varieties for Australian banana growers (BA21002), which is funded by Hort Innovation, using the banana industry research and development levies and contributions from the Australian Government. Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian horticulture. The Queensland Government has also co-funded the project through the Department of Primary Industries.

Hort Innovation BANANA FUND Queensland Government

DNA: THE KEY TO A BETTER BANANA

By Emily Rames (Department of Primary Industries, QLD), Andy Chen and Elizabeth Aitken (University of QLD), Robert Henry (QAAFI) and Rajeev Varshney (Murdoch University) on behalf on the AS21006 Banana Team

Investment in banana varities is key to sustaining the industry's long-term productivity and crucial to addressing many challenges such as disease incursions, climate variability and reduced availability of agricultural chemicals, while enhancing competitiveness on a global scale.

Recent advances in genomics technologies, along with falling costs, are helping plant breeding programs progress much faster around the world. Internationally, scientists have also invested major effort into sequencing the banana genome. But what does genome sequencing actually mean, and why is it important?

A plant's genome is its complete set of DNA - essentially its instruction manual for life. The sequence and arrangement of DNA building blocks form the "words" and "sentences" that determine how the plant grows, reproduces, and interacts with its environment.

Through genome sequencing, researchers are uncovering valuable insights, such as:

- Why some banana varieties resist diseases while others do not.
- How different varieties adapt to environmental conditions and farming practices.
- Why some varieties grow faster, produce larger fruit, or display particular fruit characteristics.

By identifying specific regions of the DNA, including genes and genetic markers, linked to beneficial traits like disease resistance, target specific genetic changes in variety improvement programs. Promising plants can be selected for further evaluation at an early stage, reducing the cost and scale of field trials while improving the likelihood of identifying plants with the desired traits. Ultimately, this knowledge and these advanced genetic tools enhance the efficiency and success of variety improvement programs (Figure 1).

Overseas efforts in banana genome sequencing and trait marker identification have largely supported conventional breeding programs. Much of this work has targeted development of banana varieties suited to specific overseas markets and production contexts, often very different to those in Australia.

Australia is now driving its own innovation in banana genomics research through project AS21006 'Building an Advanced Genomics Platform for Australian Horticulture.' The Hort Frontiers investment is utilising cutting-edge technologies to develop genomics tools and resources relevant to the Australian environment and banana industry.

The project team brings together scientists with world-leading expertise in genomics technologies and banana research, from Murdoch University, the Department of Primary Industries (QLD), the University of Queensland/Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation, and Beijing Genomics Institute. The project is led by Professor Rajeev Varshney, a globally recognised leader in the development and application of genomics technologies for the rapid improvement of various crops. A collaboration with CIRAD (France) has enabled the project to draw upon additional world-leading expertise in banana genomics.

Genomic resources generated through AS21006 can be used to accelerate variety development programs (Figure 1) and support a wide range of banana research objectives (Figure 2). Banana genome assemblies were generated using state-of-the-art technologies.

A reference genome is like a detailed instruction manual for a particular banana variety, and it takes a lot of time and effort to create. Whole genome resequencing (WGRS) allows scientists to compare other varieties to this reference, showing where their DNA is similar or different. A pangenome is like an encyclopedia ▶

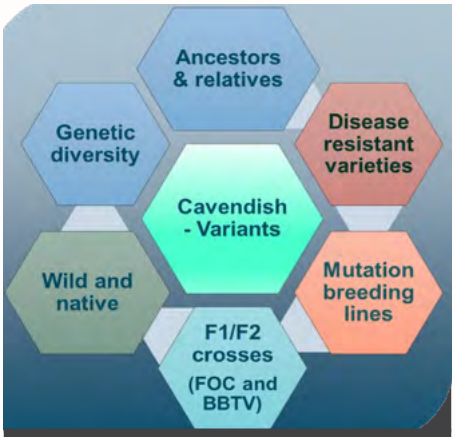


Figure 2. Genomic resources generated through project AS21006 supports a range of current and future research priorities.

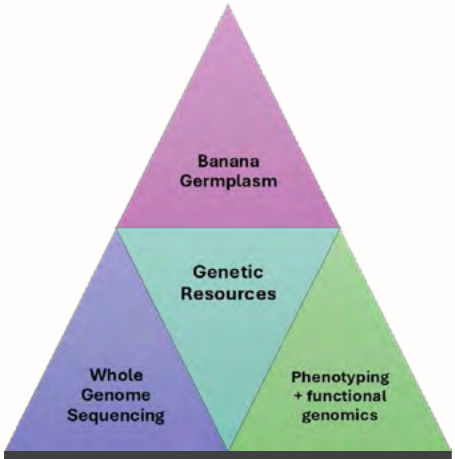


Figure 3. Building banana genetic resources.

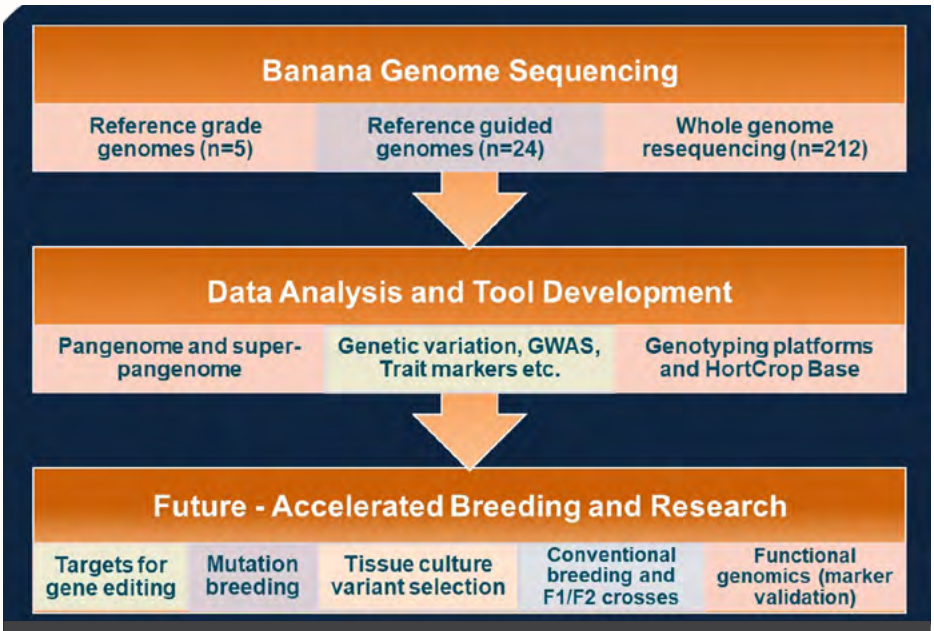


Figure 1. Genomic resources being generated through project AS21006 and future applications.

that combines multiple reference genomes and resequencing data, making it a powerful tool to compare DNA across many banana varieties.

The project has generated the most complete Cavendish reference genome to date, with notable differences between our Williams genome and the Chinese Baxijiao genome. Along with analyses of genetic variation in other Cavendish selections, including those with Fusarium TR4 resistance, the reference genome supports efforts to improve Cavendish varieties.

A pangenome has also been built, including Cavendish and Goldfinger ancestors, cultivated varieties, and wild relatives. This "DNA encyclopedia" helps identify genes linked to disease resistance and stress tolerance. Understanding genetic differences in these types of bananas provides valuable insights to guide crop improvement.

The project is now expanding this into a super-pangenome, which will allow researchers to systematically detect genetic differences, discover useful markers, and develop tools for faster and more precise improvement of Cavendish and other banana varieties.

Other project work includes identifying genetic markers of Fusarium and yellow Sigatoka resistance, development of high through-put genotyping platforms, as well as a public data repository "HortCropBase". Future investment to obtain further phenotyping and functional genomics data will enable genetic tools to be better developed for practical use.

The AS21006 Banana Team

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Funding acknowledgement

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Hort Innovation Frontiers®

FRONTIERS: ACCELERATING INDUSTRY WIDE IMPACT

Innovation doesn't just happen in a lab, it starts on farm, with real challenges and practical ideas.

Frontiers is Hort Innovation's innovative investment model designed to fast-track new ideas that deliver real impact for growers by attracting private co-investment.

Frontiers investments address major, industry-wide challenges and future opportunities - spanning robotics, pest and disease management, precision agriculture, autonomous farming systems, next-generation equipment, climate resilience, market expansion and other disruptive technologies. These projects are often cross-commodity, delivering benefits across multiple industries rather than a single crop.

How it works with levy funded R&D

Frontiers is designed to extend and amplify levy funded work, not duplicate it. The program enables faster scaling, broader partnerships, and the ability to respond to ideas that may be outside traditional levy pathways.

Frontiers uses funding that sits outside normal levy-funded R&D, made up of the Commonwealth's matching of the horticulture industry's Gross Value of Production that remains after levy priorities are met.

In practice this means:

- Around 35 cents in every project dollar comes from the Australian Government.
- The remaining 65 cents is co-invested by private co-investors.

The co-investment model increases the impact of levy dollars and attracts new partners who back innovation that works on farm.

More than projects

More about Frontiers can be found on the website: **www.frontiers.au**
Frontiers also supports structured innovation programs; with one major initiative being the Australian-Grown Innovation (AGI) program (**www.frontiers.au/agi**), which helps growers turn grassroots ideas into commercial solutions.

Other programs within Frontiers include:

- **Innovation Partnerships** – major, multi-year technology and research projects year technology and research projects
- **Venture Fund** – investing in ag-tech that can benefit Australian horticulture at scale

More about Frontiers can be found on our website: www.frontiers.au

Get involved

Frontiers works with expert advisors - including growers, technical specialists, researchers, and industry partners - to shape projects and ensure investment decisions are grounded in real-world needs. If you know someone with a promising idea, want to get involved as outlined above, or if you're seeing challenges that need new solutions reach out to the Frontiers team through your Industry Service Manager - Sarah Strutt (**sarah.strutt@horticulture.com.au**)

PROJECTS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Spatially enabling tree crop production practice
Seeks to geographically identify and map fundamental industry information such as variety, planting date, management, and productivity of tree orchards. This collation of information will directly assist market access, traceability, biosecurity response, yield forecasting, carbon storage, regeneration and drought resilience.
Code to search on Frontiers website: AS23000
PestREADI: Regionally-enabled agroecological decision
Developing and implementing pest management systems that can respond to a range of current, establishing, and future interrelated pest challenges at both crop and landscape levels within an increasingly chemically-limited future.
Code to search on Frontiers website: BY22003
Banana multi- pathogen diagnostics
Aims to develop a cost-effective, highly sensitive diagnostic tool, Banana MultiPath-BMP, to detect up to 15 banana pathogens with accuracy equal to or better than real-time PCR. Designed with Australian industry needs as the top priority.
Code to search on Frontiers website: BY24003

CROP MANAGEMENT HAD GREATER EFFECT THAN FERTILISER RATE

UPPER DARADGEE MULTI-RATE NITROGEN TRIAL UPDATE

By Alex Lindsay, Project Leader – Queensland Department of Primary Industries

From 2020 to 2023, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI) ran a large multi-rate nitrogen trial at Tropicana Bananas' Upper Daradgee farm. The trial was funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality program as part of the Banana Nutrient Rate Trials project and was conducted under commercial farming conditions.

Five nitrogen fertiliser rates were tested, ranging up to almost 700 kilograms per hectare per year. More than 200 banana plants were monitored every four weeks through to the end of the fourth ratoon, with almost 1,000 bunches harvested in total. All bunches were processed through Tropicana's commercial packing shed so that real pack-out rates could be measured.

The trial showed that banana growth and yield were influenced by crop management, weather and site conditions, in addition to fertiliser rate.

Conducting a scientific trial within a commercial farming system presented several challenges, which are important to consider when interpreting the results.

THE SITE

The farm, located close to the North Johnstone River, has been used for banana production for several decades and the trial site was fallowed for more than a year before planting. Replicated trial plots were randomly located among surrounding production plants. The soil is an Innisfail series alluvial brown dermosol.

Tropicana staff adding fertiliser to trial vats.

Standard site preparation was carried out, including ripping and pre plant fertiliser application. Soon after planting, some plants showed poor growth due to soil disturbance from land levelling. As a result, additional plots were established nearby to supplement the remaining plots.

Tissue cultured Williams Cavendish bananas were planted on 8 October 2020 at a density of 1,470 plants per hectare. The trial included 35 plots, each with six plants, giving a total of 210 trial plants.

Five nitrogen rates were tested. The lowest rate (N1) was designed to be lower in the first year than in subsequent years, while the other four rates were planned to remain constant over time.

The trial was fertigated twice per month, with all treatments receiving fertiliser at the same frequency. Due to weather conditions, fertigation could not always occur as planned, meaning the full intended rates were not applied each year.

The number of half monthly fertigation events decreased over time, from 23 in year one to 16 in year four. As a result, the actual nitrogen applied declined across all treatments over the life of the trial. The table below shows the nitrogen rates that were applied each year.

Actual rate of applied nitrogen (kg N per ha)

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4
N1	268	333	283	267
N2	383	333	283	267
N3	478	417	354	333
N4	574	500	425	400
N5	669	583	496	467

CROP MANAGEMENT

For the first two years, Tropicana managed the trial using its standard 'tailing' approach, which aims to create a short belling window by removing plants that have not belled by a set time, allowing followers to establish more quickly for the next ratoon.

This practice played an important role in the trial results, as it reduced the relative advantage of faster growing plants.

Due to the delayed belling caused by cool conditions in 2022, Tropicana agreed to delay cutout of the second ratoon plants.

Some trial plants snapped off due to banana weevil borer in first ratoon.

From third ratoon on, the site was managed under a continuous cropping system rather than a narrow harvest window. Growth during this later phase was still influenced by the earlier active management.

WEATHER

Weather conditions affected plant growth throughout the trial, with three key factors having a major impact.

Extended wet periods each year sometimes delayed fertigation, with gaps of up to eight weeks between applications.

Cool and cloudy conditions from July to September 2022 delayed the emergence of most second ratoon bells. Many plants did not bell before Tropicana's usual cutout date in early October.

In December 2023, the trial site was affected by Tropical Cyclone Jasper. Trial plants were heavily de-leafed before landfall and then inundated by flood waters for 24 to 48 hours after the cyclone crossed the coast near Cape Tribulation.

PESTS AND DISEASE

In early 2022, several dozen first ratoon plants snapped after bunch emergence, both within the trial and in the surrounding plantation. The cause was banana weevil borer, which is widespread in the region but had not been a major issue on this farm in recent years due to active chemical treatment by Tropicana.

The snap-offs occurred randomly and were not related to fertiliser rate. Tropicana treated all second ratoon plants in the area with insecticide, and no further snap-offs occurred in later ratoons.

Although some bunches were lost, the trial's robust statistical design meant it could continue. Some members of the Project Reference Group, made up of representatives of the local farming community, the Australian Banana Growers' Council and government were concerned that plant recovery following the pest outbreak may not fully represent typical growing conditions.

ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT

DPI staff regularly collected surface soil samples to measure nutrient levels, with a particular focus on nitrogen (N).

Soil N levels were highest in the highest nitrogen treatment (N5) and lowest in the lowest treatment (N1). N levels generally peaked during the dry season and declined during the wet season. After 2022, soil N levels did not reach earlier highs, which may reflect the lower fertiliser rates applied in later years, and possibly higher crop demand.

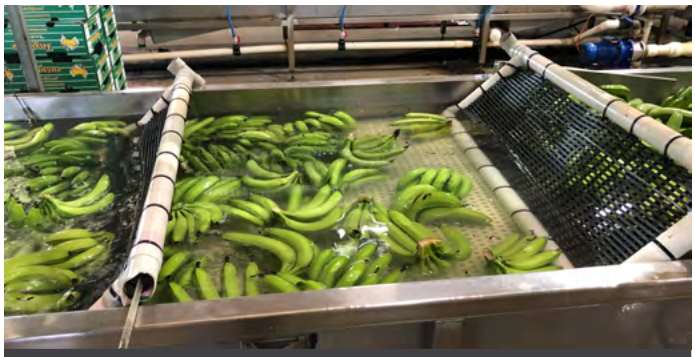
Soil water samples were also collected every two to four weeks using drainage flux meter lysimeters installed one metre below the planted mound. This allowed DPI to estimate losses of nutrients dissolved in soil water through leaching.

Over the four-year monitoring period, the amount of dissolved N leached under the highest nitrogen rate was substantially higher than under the lowest rate.

PACK OUT RATES

Trial fruit was harvested weekly and processed through Tropicana's commercial packing shed. Almost 1,000 bunches were handled over three years.

On each harvest day, bunches were grouped by fertiliser treatment. Fruit was de-handed and graded to commercial standards, allowing actual pack-out rates to be recorded for each nitrogen rate under real production conditions. ▶



Fruit grouped by treatment through washing troughs.

Actual pack-out rates per treatment recorded each harvest day.

RESULTS

Plants receiving the lowest nitrogen rate (N1) had a significantly longer cycle time in the plant crop than those receiving higher rates. However, active crop management reduced this difference by accelerating the first ratoon follower of the cut-out plants.

At the conclusion of the trial a statistically significant difference in total production was not observed between treatments. Average production after four years ranged from 30.8 to 34.5 tonnes (2,055 to 2,297 x 15kg cartons) per hectare per year. By the end of the project, faster growing plants had already harvested a fifth ratoon, while slower plants had not yet reached a third ratoon. These results relate to a specific time period, and the combination of environmental conditions and management practices at this site.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

This was the largest multi-rate nitrogen trial in bananas for which results are publicly available. While findings provide valuable insights, they are not intended to represent outcomes for all farms, locations or seasons.

Growers are encouraged to consider nitrogen management as part of a whole farm system, alongside crop management, timing and seasonal conditions. At this site, higher nitrogen rates did not result in statistically significant increases in growth or yield but did result in greater losses to the environment.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

More detailed information will be released to industry.
For more, please email **alex.lindsay@dpi.qld.gov.au**
This trial was successfully delivered thanks to the enormous support of Tropicana and their staff. It was funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program.

Tropicana staff de-handing trial bunches.

CARBON TIMELINE

For the first group starting in 2025, companies will generally fall into the reporting requirements if they meet at least two of the following thresholds:

- **Revenue of $500 million or more**
- **Assets of $1 billion or more**
- **500 or more employees**

—

A second group of smaller large companies will begin reporting from 2027 if they meet at least two of these thresholds:

- **Revenue of $50 million or more**
- **Assets of $25 million or more**
- **100 or more employees**

COUNTING YOUR CARBON

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BANANA GROWERS?

Sustainability and carbon are becoming common topics in agriculture - in the media, in markets and increasingly in conversations across the supply chain. While much of the discussion has focused on large companies, new Australian Government reporting requirements are likely to bring banana growers into the conversation over time.

Recent changes to the Corporations Act 2001 have introduced new reporting rules to improve transparency around how businesses manage climate risks and emissions. The reforms align Australia with international reporting standards that investors and markets are increasingly expecting.

Recording some key inputs now, which you're likely doing already, will prepare you well for carbon reporting in the future.

From 2025, the largest corporations were required to report information about how climate change affects their business, including their greenhouse gas emissions and how they are managing climate risks. The requirements will be phased in over several years, starting with the biggest companies and gradually extending to smaller, but still large businesses.

While most small to medium sized banana farms will not be directly required to report, the changes may still reach the farm gate through supply chains. Food processors, retailers and banks that must report will increasingly need information from the businesses they buy from, including banana growers. This is sometimes called "Scope 3" emissions. Accountants, tax agents or other professional advisors will be able to provide information on the likely impact of individual businesses.

WHAT GROWERS MIGHT BE ASKED TO RECORD

Many growers are already collecting some of the information that may be required through food safety and quality standards, environmental standards and the Queensland Government's water quality regulations.

In some cases, buyers may ask growers to provide an estimated emissions number for their farm. That number, sometimes called a carbon footprint, is usually calculated from a combination of farm inputs and activities. An example of a specific horticulture calculator can be found at: **piccc.org.au/resources/Tools**

Examples of information growers may be asked to track include:

- Fuel use (diesel, petrol, LPG)
- Electricity consumption
- Fertiliser type and application rates
- Irrigation energy use
- Chemical use
- Land use and vegetation on the farm
- Soil and carbon management practices

Recording this information does not necessarily mean extra paperwork, but understanding what data may be needed in the future will make the transition easier if supply chains begin asking for it.

CARBON ON FARM - WHY IT MATTERS

Carbon is not just a reporting issue. It's also closely linked to soil health, productivity and profitability.

Soils that hold more carbon generally have better structure, improved water-holding capacity and stronger biological activity. Growers can help retain and build carbon on their farms through practical management actions such as:

- Maintaining groundcover or cover crops during fallow periods
- Reducing excessive soil disturbance where possible
- Managing irrigation and fertiliser efficiently

Many of these practices are already part of good farm management and can support both production outcomes and environmental performance.

START SMALL, START NOW

The ABGC is encouraging growers to become familiar with the changes early, even if the reporting obligations do not apply directly to them yet.

As ABGC's Industry Strategy Manager Michelle McKinlay, explains: "These new reporting rules are mainly aimed at very large companies, but growers will increasingly be part of the story because supply chains will need information from the farm level."

She says the best approach is simply to start understanding what information might be needed and recording those few key things now – like fuel, fertiliser and electricity use.

For growers wanting to explore the topic further, the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC) provides practical information on Australia's new sustainability reporting framework. Scan the QR code or search for 'ASIC sustainability reporting'

STRONG GROWER PARTICIPATION IN FINAL ROUND OF BANANA BEST PRACTICE FUND

By Zoe Holmes, for ABGC's BMP team

The final round of the Banana Best Practice Fund has officially closed, with high demand and strong grower participation underscoring the industry's commitment to protecting the Reef and improving on-farm sustainability.

Delivered by the Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC) under the Banana Best Management Practice (BMP) Project, the Fund, supported by the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program, has helped 66 banana growers implement best-practice projects across more than 3,600 hectares since 2023.

Through six rounds of funding, the program has supported 83 separate initiatives to make on-farm improvements aimed at reducing nutrient, pesticide and sediment runoff from banana farms in Great Barrier Reef catchments.

The final round six received 25 applications, with 23 new projects successfully funded to commence this year. Funded projects as of round six have included:

46 upgraded spreaders and fertigation systems – complying with Reef regulations and reducing leaching

24 site-specific solutions to reduce erosion – including contour planting, block levelling, and improved roads and drains

21 side-throw slashers – adding organic matter to banana beds and reducing erosion and P loss

02 machinery upgrades for permanent beds – reducing cultivation

03 nutrient management and soil health trials – large scale composting and GPS rate control

Together, these works will prevent an estimated 611 tonnes of fine sediment and 2.8 tonnes of dissolved inorganic nitrogen from leaving Great Barrier Reef catchments each year.

ABGC's Industry Strategy Manager, Michelle McKinlay, said the program's success was proof of growers' long-term commitment to environmental stewardship and productivity.

"Through six rounds of the Banana Best Practice Fund, 66 growers have taken part, delivering on-farm improvements across more than 3,600 hectares, around one-third of Australia's banana industry.

"The strong response to this final round shows that growers are serious about making lasting changes that benefit both their farms and the Reef," Michelle said.

"Through co-investment, growers have led the way in adopting better technologies, improving soil and water management, and demonstrating the banana industry's ongoing leadership in sustainability."

East Palmerston banana grower Kayla Zecchinati said a block contouring project on her property addressed long-standing erosion issues caused by the paddock's original layout and limited drainage.

"Before the project, we were experiencing significant topsoil loss due to the way the block was laid out and the lack of effective drainage," Kayla said.

"Funding through the Banana BMP project enabled us to redesign the paddock to follow the natural contours of the land, add a new road, and relocate the irrigation system.

"We're now able to get into this block during the wet, which is a huge improvement. It's performing much better than our other blocks and has given us the confidence to roll this approach out across the rest of the farm."

Michelle added that, since 2023, a total of $2.92 million has been invested, with $1.32 million provided through the Fund and $1.6 million co-invested by growers, plus $18,000 in in-kind support.

"This program has built real momentum in the banana industry," she said.

"It's a perfect example of government and industry working hand-in-hand to deliver tangible benefits for the environment and for farming businesses."

Growers who submitted funding applications to the final round of the BMP project have been contacted with the outcome of their submission.

The Banana BMP's Best Practice Fund is funded under the Banana Best Management Practice (BMP) Project (2023–2026). The Banana BMP is funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program and delivered by the Australian Banana Growers' Council in partnership with growers.

The Zecchinati family, with Kayla in the middle, on their East Palmerston farm.

SOIL TESTING HELPING HILL60 PLANTATION IMPROVE CROP HEALTH

By Zoe Holmes, for ABGC's BMP team

Understanding what's happening in the soil is helping Navpreet and Gursharan from Hill60 Plantation at El Arish grow stronger, healthier banana crops.

After planting a new block, the growers began noticing signs that something wasn't right. Leaves were yellowing, necrosis was appearing on the edges and plant growth across the block was uneven.

"We could see the plants were not healthy, but we didn't know the reason," Navpreet said. "That's why we contacted the Banana BMP team."

Soil testing quickly identified the issue, with low pH and high aluminium levels detected in the soil. These conditions can restrict root development and reduce the plant's ability to take up essential nutrients.

Working with the BMP team, the growers developed a paddock-specific nutrient management plan. Amendments including lime and Cal-Mag were applied, and six-monthly soil testing was introduced to monitor soil health and guide future nutrient decisions.

"The soil test helped us understand the problem," Gursharan said. "Before we were guessing a bit. Now we know what the soil needs."

Since implementing the plan, plant health has improved and fruit performance across the block is strong.

"Now the plants look much better and more even," Navpreet said. "Having the plan gives us confidence we are doing the right thing."

Support through the Banana BMP Best Practice Fund also enabled the purchase of a fertiliser spreader, helping improve fertiliser application efficiency while strengthening on-farm biosecurity and self-sufficiency.

The Hill60 Plantation project highlights how understanding individual paddock conditions and using soil testing to guide nutrient management can deliver benefits for both productivity and sustainability. Over the past four years, 46 growers have worked with the Banana BMP team to develop nutrient management plans tailored to their individual farming situations, helping growers better understand their soils and optimise fertiliser use.

"For other growers, I would say it is worth doing the soil testing," Gursharan said. "You learn a lot about your farm and it helps you make better decisions."

Growers interested in improving their nutrient management can contact the BMP team at **bmp@abgc.org.au**.

The Banana Best Management Practice Project (2023–2026) is funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program and delivered by the Australian Banana Growers' Council in partnership with north Queensland growers.

Before

After

On-site at Hill60 Plantation in El Arish.

Hill60 Plantation, El Arish, Queensland

FNQ BANANA GROWERS DIG DEEP INTO SOIL HEALTH

Banana growers across Far North Queensland rolled up their sleeves in March for a series of practical soil health workshops delivered by regenerative agriculture specialist Simon Mattsson, walking away with fresh ideas and plenty to trial when they got home.

Held at the Centre for Wet Tropics Agriculture at South Johnstone, the workshops were part of ABGC's Banana Best Management Practice Project, funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program. The series culminated in a small group composting and biofertiliser workshop on the Friday.

A central theme across the sessions was building diversity within a monoculture system, something most banana growers know is easier said than done. Mattsson challenged attendees to see every patch of bare soil as a missed opportunity, and encouraged them to think about windows for introducing plant diversity, whether during fallow or early in the crop cycle when sunlight can still penetrate the plant bed. One message that really resonated: no matter how good a biological product is, if the foundational soil biology and diversity isn't already there to support it, you're wasting your money.

Friday's session featured fellow grower Michael Russo of Marlin Blue Bananas at Boogan, who shared how he's woven biology into his existing fertiliser and spray programs without throwing out what already works. Simple tweaks such as letting weeds reach height before spraying to keep herbicides away from the soil and root zone, are making a real difference on his farm.

The take-home from both days was clear: building healthy soils isn't about a single product or a complete overhaul, it's about understanding your system, finding your windows of opportunity, and making small, consistent changes that add up over time.

For more information on upcoming soil health activities, get in touch with the ABGC BMP team at bmp@abgc.org.au.

The Banana Best Management Practice Project (2023–2026) is funded through the Queensland Government's Queensland Reef Water Quality Program and delivered by the Australian Banana Growers' Council in partnership with growers.

Soil health workshops were hosted by regenerative agriculture specialist Simon Mattsson.

Simon Mattsson (left) and Marlin Blu Bananas' Michael Russo (right) leading the small group workshop on Friday.

MEET MUKESH DHITAL

Mukesh Dhital has worked in agriculture in Nepal, studied environmental engineering in Australia, and now brings both perspectives to the Banana BMP team.

Mukesh recently joined the Banana Best Management Practices (BMP)program and is based in Innisfail, supporting growers across the region.

Originally from Nepal, Mukesh completed a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Engineering at Tribhuvan University before working as a Farm Mechanisation Officer with Muktinath Agriculture Company. After gaining industry experience, he moved to Australia to complete a Master's Degree in Environmental Engineering at Western Sydney University.

His academic background and interest in sustainable farming made the Banana BMP program a natural fit.

"I'm interested in programs that promote sustainable agriculture and better land and water management practices," Mukesh said."BMP focuses on improving farm layout and implementing better sediment and runoff control practices on banana farms, which aligns closely with my studies."

As part of the BMP team, Mukesh works alongside growers to identify practical improvements that support both farm productivity and environmental outcomes. His role focuses on areas such as erosion and sediment control, nutrient management and farm layout planning to help reduce nutrient and sediment runoff entering the Great Barrier Reef.

While he is still learning about the Australian banana industry, Mukesh says he has already been impressed by the people behind it.

"What has surprised me most so far is the passion and dedication growers have for growing bananas," he said. Mukesh is also looking forward to working directly with growers and learning more about the region's farming systems.

He speaks English, Nepalese and Hindi, which may help when communicating with growers who are more comfortable speaking Hindi. "Being able to explain information in a grower's preferred language can make discussions clearer and more comfortable," he said.

Grower Support and Engagement Officer Maurice Thomspon is keen to support growers however he can.

WORKING WITH YOU TO PROTECT AUSSIE BANANAS

Reading the latest edition of Australian Bananas is the perfect way to get up-to-speed on latest industry news and research. Hopefully it sparks a new idea or encourages you to have a conversation.

But you know - and we do too - that sometimes you just can't beat a face-to-face chat or a hands-on demonstration.
That's why the Grower Support (Biosecurity) Team has developed an Extension Strategy for Panama TR4.

Essentially, the Extension Strategy guides how ABGC will work with banana growers in Far North Queensland to strengthen on-farm biosecurity and make practical improvements to manage the risk of this disease. Extension is proven method for bridging the gap between knowledge and on-farm changes. It's about increasing awareness, sharing skills, developing strong relationships and working together in driving effective biosecurity changes. Importantly, it recognises that while farms will be at different stages when it comes to biosecurity measures, no one knows their property better or is more equipped to protect it than growers themselves.

Support for all banana farms in FNQ

We'll focus on helping you take proactive and practical steps that strengthen on-farm biosecurity. The Grower Support (Biosecurity) Team will aim to:

- understand your priorities,
- explore and decide on practical actions,
- find ways to implement those actions and;
- encourage ongoing monitoring to drive continuous improvement over time

Support for properties with Panama TR4

If a property has a confirmed detection of Panama TR4 or becomes a suspect property under the Code, growers must meet certain biosecurity requirements. The Code sets the minimum actions needed to manage Panama TR4, and meeting these helps growers fulfil their General Biosecurity Obligation. While Biosecurity Queensland is responsible for assessing and monitoring compliance, the Grower Support (Biosecurity) Team will work with growers in helping them understand their obligations and providing assistance to put the right measures in place.

On the ground

These activities will be led by the Grower Support and Engagement Officer, Maurice Thompson. If you haven't yet met Maurice, he's got a wealth of experience and a strong, practical approach to helping growers. Before joining ABGC over six months ago, he worked on a range of biosecurity responses including banana freckle, green myrtle virus, browsing ants and Asian honeybee. Coupled with 25 years in hospitality, he's ready for a chat or to head out into the paddock. As he said when he first took on the role, it's about providing full support to growers. "That might mean taking a phone call, or it might mean visiting them on-farm. It's about being available." Stay up-to-date on latest news by visiting: **abgcgrowersupport.com.au**


Phillip Lansdown


Kim Prins


Parminder Pabla

IN THE FIELD, ON YOUR SIDE

Panama TR4 remains one of the biggest threats facing Australian banana production.

There's no treatment and it spreads easily, via people, plants or machinery. That's why surveillance remains one of the most important tools we have to protect your farm, your neighbours, and the future of the industry.

At the centre of that effort is the Grower Support (Biosecurity) surveillance team.

A team that knows farming

The surveillance team brings together a strong mix of practical experience from across agriculture and importantly, from within the banana industry itself.

Parminder Pabla has lived and worked the realities many growers face. From managing plantations to running his own farm, he understands just how quickly things can change.

As he puts it: "Banana farming isn't just a job- it's a way of life shaped by land, seasons and community."

That perspective drives his approach to surveillance and biosecurity, keeping it grounded, practical and relevant to real farm operations.

For Parminder, the focus is simple: "Supporting early detection and strong, practical biosecurity is one of the best ways we can protect farms and families."

Phillip Lansdown also brings deep, hands-on experience, having worked across banana farms of all sizes for more than a decade.

"I've worked on small farms and large farms... always in bananas," he said.

That background means he knows what to look for and just as importantly, how farms actually operate day-to-day.

Phil sees surveillance as part of a bigger picture.

"Biosecurity really starts at ground level and everyone's got to be on board," he said.

Kim Prins rounds out the team with a diverse background across agriculture and on-ground operations. His focus is firmly on working with growers, not adding to their pressures.

"I've been on both sides of these challenges... I understand the frustrations growers face," he said.

Why surveillance matters

Industry continues to invest in a structured, risk-based surveillance program.

This approach targets higher-risk areas - looking at factors like proximity to known infections, movement of soil and water, and farm activity- to ensure effort is focused where it matters most.

You'll hear the term "all-in surveillance"- and it's exactly what it sounds like.

It means surveillance isn't just something the field team does. It's a shared responsibility across the entire industry.

For growers, that means:

- Keeping a close eye on your own blocks
- Reporting anything unusual early
- Supporting surveillance visits
- Maintaining strong on-farm biosecurity

For the surveillance team, it means:

- Regular, strategic property visits
- Monitoring high-risk areas
- Sampling where needed
- Providing practical advice & support ▶

QBAN SCHEME FACILITIES

QUALITY APPROVED BANANA NURSERY

Mission Beach Tissue Culture Laboratory & Nursery	07 4068 8553	sdlavis4@bigpond.com	Lindsay Road (PO Box 326), Mission Beach QLD 4852
Lowes TC Pty Ltd Laboratory & Nursery	02 4389 8750	Greg@lowestc.com.au Patricia@lowestc.com.au Natasha@lowestc.com.au	202 Tumbi Rd, Tumbi Umbi NSW 2261
Sival Farming Tissue Culture Nursery	07 4068 8559	sdlavis4@bigpond.com	Dati Road, Walkamin QLD 4872
Yuruga Laboratory and Nursery	07 4093 3826	admin@howefarms.com.au	5970 Kennedy Highway, Walkamin QLD 4872
Ausplant Nursery	07 4662 4934	brady@ausplantnursery.com.au	72 Winton St (PO Box 766), Dalby QLD 4405

What to expect when your farm is scheduled

If you've got a surveillance visit coming up, here's what it typically looks like:

A call ahead of time

You'll be contacted in advance to organise a suitable time.

Confirmation on the day

The Field Officer will touch base again before arriving.

On-farm inspection

The team will inspect every fourth row of your property, focusing on higher-risk zones and looking for symptoms consistent with Panama TR4. You're welcome to be there, but it's not essential.

If something looks suspicious

Any suspect plants will be flagged, and if needed, samples will be taken and sent for laboratory testing.

All of this is done under strict protocols to ensure accuracy and maintain biosecurity standards. Come clean, leave clean – always.

Designed to work with you

One of the biggest priorities for the surveillance program is keeping it practical.

That means:

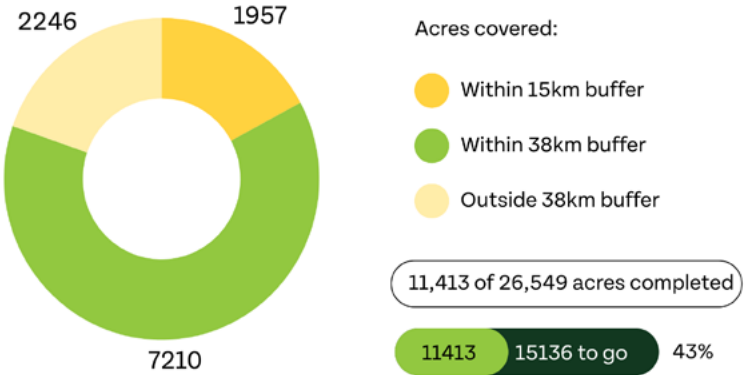
- Working around your schedule
- Targeting inspections, not disrupting operations
- Providing advice that actually works on-farm

Ultimately, the system is only as strong as the people behind it. That includes ABGC's Grower Support surveillance team but, just as importantly, it includes every grower who wants to safeguard their own farm.

WHERE WE'RE AT

- **11 Properties with Panama TR4 (confirmed)**
- **Location of detections: Tully Valley**

Surveillance statistics for 31 March 2025 – 20 February 2026



TEAM UPDATE

Program Manager Elisha Farmer is on parental leave, with Senior Project Officer Sarah Rowan stepping into the Acting Manager position for the next 6 months. Sarah has been with the program for a year and brings a wealth of previous management experience to the role. Her appointment provides continuity for the program. Reach out at any time: **0458 777 929** or **growersupport@abgc.org.au**

Sarah Rowan is currently Acting Manager of the Grower Support (Biosecurity) program.

BIOSECURITY IN ACTION: MICHAEL'S STORY

SAFEGUARDING A FAMILY LEGACY

By Ingrid Jenkins on behalf of the DPI Banana Extension Team

On the picturesque mid-north coast of New South Wales, third-generation banana farmer Michael Singh is taking proactive steps to safeguard his family's 30-acre farm near Woolgoolga. With devastating diseases like Fusarium wilt already impacting and continuing to threaten banana-growing regions, Michael has embraced biosecurity as a key focus of his farming practices. Determined to protect his livelihood and secure a future for the next generation, Michael's journey highlights the importance of planning, collaboration and taking action.

The threat of Fusarium wilt

Michael and his family currently grow Dwarf Rossi and Ducasse banana varieties. Both are highly susceptible to Fusarium wilt race 1 and subtropical race 4, which continue to spread across New South Wales banana-growing regions, significantly impacting growers.
There is also the ever-present risk of the introduction of the virulent strain, Fusarium wilt tropical race 4, which is not currently in NSW. Biosecurity is a big focus for Michael.

"As a third-generation banana farmer, with my son now stepping in as the fourth, we have a long history of growing bananas," he said.

"I want to ensure that we can continue to grow bananas in years to come. That's why I couldn't just sit on my hands and hope we didn't get Panama disease.

"Investing in biosecurity is about protecting everything we've worked for and securing a future for my son and the business."

Building stronger biosecurity practices

Over the past 12 months, Michael has significantly enhanced his biosecurity measures, building on his existing practices such as exclusion zoning - limiting non-essential entry into his farm, boot exchange with dedicated farm boots, entry footbath, signage, and a secure front gate.

Michael is also proactive in having conversations with delivery drivers and service providers about his biosecurity procedures, ensuring that they use the dedicated footbath, disinfect their floor mats and providing an overview of what's required of them.

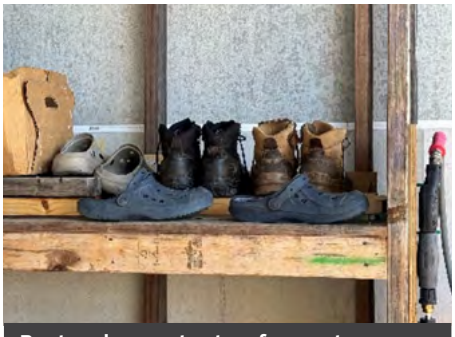
"Once they get the idea it's OK. However, people can become complacent, so you need to keep on top of who is visiting and make sure they are doing the right thing," Michael said.

Among his new initiatives, Michael has constructed a perimeter fence along the boundary of a neighbouring banana farm to prevent the crossover of vehicles, machinery, and people. Additionally, he has developed a gravel carpark area that doubles as a space for vehicle cleaning and disinfecting for equipment, vehicles and vehicle floor mats. To support this, Michael installed a high-pressure cleaning system, which includes a slab and purpose-built cabinet to house a high-pressure washer. Above the washer sits a 1000-litre shuttle containing the disinfectant solution, which uses gravity to prime the system–eliminating the need for a separate pump.

Conversations that led to action

Michael had been considering implementing these new initiatives to strengthen his biosecurity for some time.

Michael Singh demonstrates his high-pressure disinfecting system.


Boot exchange at entry of property.


New gravel exclusion car park/wash-down and disinfecting pad at entrance to farm.

Footbath at front entry of property.

He sought advice and exchanged ideas with several key biosecurity experts, including ABGC's R&D Manager Rosie Godwin, Tegan Cavallaro and Stewart Lindsay from Queensland's Department of Primary Industries (DPI), and Steven Norman from New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD). However, as Michael noted, having the knowledge and engaging in regular discussions about biosecurity doesn't always lead to action.

A key moment came for Michael late last year when Far North Queensland banana farmer and ABGC board member Andrew Serra visited his farm. Over dinner that evening, a grower-to-grower conversation with Andrew became the turning point that inspired Michael to finally put his long-considered plans for a wash-down area and disinfecting system into action.

The system delivers high pressure through a long hose, ensuring sufficient reach to the wash-down and disinfecting pad.

"Timing is everything," Michael explained. "I was out installing a fence when Andrew visited, and we started talking about biosecurity. Andrew was able to offer advice specific to my farm and business. Every farm is different, with its own unique layout, topography, size of business and Andrew understood that what worked for him wouldn't necessarily work for me.

"Instead, he helped me think through what would be the best approach for my situation. Having those earlier conversations with key experts was invaluable, and when I spoke with another grower like Andrew, it all came together, and we were able to figure out the right solution."

Michael has kept his biosecurity measures as simple as possible and is confident that they are well-suited to his farm's specific needs. While he acknowledges that some factors affecting his farm are beyond his control, he is confident that he is doing everything possible to manage the aspects within his control.

Paying it forward

When asked how he would 'pay it forward' and share the advice he received with other growers thinking about biosecurity, Michael said: "Take the first step and make a change - don't put it in the too-hard basket. Start having conversations. There are industry experts and fellow growers who are more than willing to share their experiences and knowledge to help."

Clear signage at front entry of property on lockable front gate.

The Singh family on their NSW Mid North Coast farm.

Get in touch

If you'd like to discuss biosecurity on your farm or need assistance connecting with other growers, please contact the DPI Banana Extension Team: Tegan Cavallaro on **0459 846 053** or Ingrid Jenkins on **0497 801 980.** Alternatively, you can reach out to ABGC's Grower Support and Engagement Officer, Maurice Thompson, on **0455 515 805.**

Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thank you to Michael Singh for generously sharing his story and taking the time to contribute to this article.

Funding acknowledgement

This story has been written as part of the National Banana Development and Extension Program (BA25001). This program is funded by Hort Innovation, using the banana industry research and development levies, co-investment from the Department of Primary Industries and contributions from the Australian Government. Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian horticulture.

Hort Innovation BANANA FUND

Queensland Government

THE POWER OF YELLOW: HOW BANANA MARKETING IS BUILDING MOMENTUM

The Australian banana industry's marketing efforts continue to gain traction, with recent campaigns delivering strong results across consumer awareness, retail engagement and national media exposure.

From turning a banana into a swim pass, to strengthening the 'Australian Grown' message and engaging the next generation of consumers, it's clear there's still room to grow demand for this already much-loved staple.

BANANA SWIM PASS

One of the standout initiatives so far this year has been the Banana Swim Pass campaign, designed to capitalise on the key back-to-school and summer period.

The concept was simple but powerful: on a single day in January, bananas became a 'pass' for free entry into more than 60 pools across Australia. Whether someone is a professional swimmer or simply loves the sport, there's a ritual to tap into in packing a bag for the pool. A banana makes the perfect pre-or-post workout snack for anyone taking a dip.

Building on the successful Banana Gym Pass campaign, Swim Pass resulted in strong national attention and engagement.

The campaign generated more than 500 pieces of media coverage (including The Morning Show, Mamamia and news.com.au) and delivered over 52 million opportunities to see key messages. Social and video content also performed strongly, with millions of views across platforms.

What's working and what comes next

The 'Banana Pass' platform is showing clear signs of scalability, with results improving year-on-year and increasing interest from both media and retail partners.

The strategy itself doesn't need major overhaul going forward, but it does need evolution.

Bringing in high-profile ambassadors, such as Olympic swimmer Ariarne Titmus, proved effective in boosting reach and credibility. There is strong potential to continue leveraging talent partnerships that align naturally with the banana brand.

Retailers are also increasingly engaged, with major players like Woolworths and Metcash showing strong interest in participating in and amplifying campaigns.

While national reach has been strong, increasing targeted regional engagement will be important to ensure messaging resonates with all growing communities.

IT WAS ALL YELLOW...FOR 'MAKE YOUR BODY SING'

The broader 'Make Your Body Sing' campaign continues to underpin banana marketing activity, with refreshed creative helping to unify messaging across channels.

A key update has been the introduction of a distinctive yellow end frame across video and TV assets, alongside the Australian Grown logo. This provides a consistent and recognisable identity, something increasingly important in a crowded media landscape.

The campaign rollout has been carefully structured across the year, aligning with key moments such as 'back-to-school' in January and September/October (National Banana Day). Strategic, ongoing digital and social activity also remains a top priority.

Notably, there is a deliberate move to avoid the highly cluttered (and expensive) Christmas period, instead focusing investment where it can have the most impact.

Building the next generation of banana consumers

While large-scale campaigns are critical, so too is early engagement. Partnerships with organisations like Life Education (Healthy Harold) are helping to put bananas in front of children at a young age, both through sampling and educational resources.

Recent initiatives have included:

- Distribution of bananas at school events, reaching thousands of students
- Development of new classroom resources shared with teachers nationwide
- Promotions through green grocers, including competitions and giveaways

These activities are about more than short-term consumption, they're about building long-term habits and positive associations with bananas.

Importantly, they also help reinforce bananas as a healthy, everyday choice for families.

Major events delivering big exposure

Events are a great opportunity to provide face-to-face engagement with consumers at scale.

The Sydney Royal Easter Show is a flagship opportunity, with exposure to nearly 900,000 attendees across the event period.

Located within the Woolworths Fresh Food Dome, the banana presence is highly visible and interactive, featuring:

- Product sampling (including fresh bananas, smoothies and bowls)
- Smoothie bikes to engage visitors
- Grower interactions

This approach not only drives immediate consumption but also builds a stronger connection between banana-lovers and the people behind the product.

Looking ahead, an 18-month events strategy is in place, covering multiple shows across the country, including Melbourne and Perth, to ensure national visibility.

Strengthening the 'Australian Grown' message

Consumers love to shop locally sourced produce, so the Australian Grown message is being further embedded across all campaign activity.

The rollout includes integration across:

- TV and online video
- Outdoor advertising (both large and small format)
- Retail panels and in-store activity
- Social and digital content

By consistently reinforcing that bananas are Australian grown, the campaign taps into consumer preferences, while also supporting grower pride and industry identity.

Growers at the centre

While much of this activity is consumer-facing, growers remain at the heart of the strategy.

There is increasing opportunities for growers to be involved in marketing, whether through event participation, campaign storytelling, or industry communications.

This not only strengthens authenticity but also helps bridge the gap between farm and consumer.

Looking ahead, the focus is on:

- Keeping ideas fresh while building on proven concepts
- Expanding regional engagement
- Deepening retail partnerships
- Continuing to invest in long-term consumer behaviour change

With strong foundations in place, the opportunity ahead is not just to sustain this momentum, but to grow it.

Australian Bananas is funded by grower levies and delivered by Hort Innovation

SAVE THE DATE! FNQ BANANA ROADSHOWS

This August, banana researchers will hit the road, visiting Far North Queensland's major production regions as part of the National Banana Roadshows series. These industry events are a fantastic opportunity for banana growers and industry stakeholders to hear the latest updates on levy-funded research, development, and extension activities.

Wednesday 5 August – Mareeba
Thursday 6 August – Tully
Friday 7 August – Innisfail
Venues and program will be made available closer to the dates.

Pencil in the dates and join us in person to connect with our banana researchers. Full program details and venue information will be shared closer to the date via the Better Bananas website and ABGC communications.
The roadshows are proudly delivered as part of the National Banana Development and Extension Program. For enquiries, please contact the DPI banana extension team (Tegan Cavallaro **0459 846 053** or Ingrid Jenkins **0497 801 980**).

Funding acknowledgement

The National Banana Roadshows are delivered as part of the National Banana Development and Extension Program (BA25001), which is funded by Hort Innovation, using the banana research and development levy, co-investment from the Department of Primary Industries and contributions from the Australian Government. Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian horticulture.

Hort Innovation BANANA FUND

Queensland Government

UPCOMING CHEMCERT COURSES IN FNQ

Is your chemical accreditation up-to-date? The AQF3 Chemical Accreditation Course gives you the chemical safety training you'll need to achieve or renew your ChemCERT Card. It is nationally recognised, valid for 5 years and qualifies you to legally use S7 chemicals unsupervised (requirements may differ from state to state).

Upcoming face-to-face dates include:

Atherton
- 14 May 2026
- 16 July 2026

Cairns
- 11 May 2026
- 21 July 2026

Innisfail
- 19 June 2026

Mareeba
- 29 April 2026
- 4 June 2026

Visit chemcert.com.au or call **1800 444 228** to find out more, inquire about other locations or to enrol.

BENCHMARKING STRENGTHENS AS TOOL FOR GROWERS

By Eric Schluter, Aglytica

The 2024–2025 Opttimo IQ benchmarking report has been prepared at a time when many Australian banana growers are facing increasing operational pressure, particularly due to the ongoing volatility in fuel and fertiliser prices. We recognise that fuel is not just another input cost - it directly impacts day-to-day farm operations, freight, and overall business viability. These are challenging conditions, and the intent of the latest benchmarking report is not only to present performance insights, but to support growers with practical, evidence-based information during what is clearly a difficult period for the industry.

The results (FY 24/25) continue to demonstrate why whole-of-business benchmarking is becoming one of the most valuable management tools available to Australian banana growers. A major advancement in this year's report is the use of both Year on Year (Y/Y) and Like for Like (L/L) analysis. Together, these two approaches provide a much clearer understanding of industry performance than traditional annual comparisons alone.

During the reporting period, labour remained the largest single cost across the industry, followed by freight, packaging, fertiliser and chemicals, and energy. The benchmarking process helps growers see where these costs sit relative to similar businesses and where practical management opportunities may exist.

The full report is available by contacting:
Eric Schluter, Project Manager – Aglytica
0400 707 352 | eschluter@aglytica.com

BETTER THAN BANANA LOLLIES

IMPERFECT BANANAS TRANSFORMED INTO FREEZE-DRIED SWEET TREATS

By Skye Orsmond, ABGC

Second-grade Lady Finger bananas are finding new life as a crunchy, naturally sweet snack, thanks to a small but innovative venture in Dimbulah.

Aliscia Van Niekerk launched her business, Vibrant Bites, last year from a packing shed at DBC Farming, where her family grows avocados and mangoes. What began as a simple idea has quickly grown into a creative way to add value to imperfect fruit.

The inspiration came during a family camping trip.

"We stopped for snacks and came across freeze-dried fruit," Aliscia says. "My husband and the kids loved it, and I thought, why not do this with our own fruit?"

Keen to experiment, she sourced second-grade bananas from Spring Creek Produce in Tolga. "I approached Spring Creek Produce and bought their second-grade bananas to start trialling," she explains. "Now I've fine-tuned the product, and the banana is very popular."

The result is a light, crunchy snack that's proving a hit with both kids and adults.

"It's a healthy, tasty treat," she says. "My husband puts it on his cereal in the mornings, it gives an extra crunchy boost, and it's a favourite snack for my kids."

Beyond bananas, Aliscia is also working with locally grown mango, pineapple and papaya, continuing her focus on reducing waste and maximising value.

"I saw a lot of fruit not being sold and thought I could transform it into something," she says.

While still a side venture, Vibrant Bites is clearly a passion project.

"It's something I really enjoy doing," Aliscia says. "And it's a healthy treat, no added sugar or nasties, just imperfect fruit transformed into something delicious."

Vibrant Bites products are available online and at selected local outlets, including FNQ Whole Foods in Atherton, Mungalli Creek Dairy, Gillies Roadhouse and Spring Creek Produce farm stall.

www.vibrantbites.com.au

CARNARVON SWEETER BANANAS

It's a venture that's already proved successful for Carnarvon Sweeter Bananas, who launched their freeze-dried fruit at the Perth Royal Show in 2024 and spoke about their experience at the most recent Banana Congress. Carnarvon Sweeter Banana Business Manager Doriana Mangili highlighted the role of value-adding in reducing waste while creating appealing products with extended shelf life - giving second-grade bananas a new market and returning value to growers.

"Waste, as we know, is an expense - it's a social, economic and environmental issue," she said. "Value-adding reduces waste and benefits growers, it's a win-win."

www.sweeterbanana.com

Are you in?

ABGC Membership

MEMBER · AUSTRALIAN BANANA GROWERS' COUNCIL

- Belong to the only peak industry body exclusively representing banana growers.
- Have your say and get support around issues that affect your business.
- Access customised grower benefits to help you get ahead.

Find out about how membership fees are DIFFERENT to banana levies.

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