

MEDIA RELEASE



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Tractor-ready and on the way to the 2026 harvest: funding success helps Mackay Canegrowers tackle chronic labour shortages

Meeting the seasonal labour demands of the sugarcane harvest is a challenge every year. It's one to which CANEGROWERS Mackay has been gamely stepping up for almost two decades, delivering exciting, highly practical training courses each May that get new workers behind the wheel.

CANEGROWERS Mackay is excited to announce that its highly successful industry skills development program – the annual Haulout Driver Training – has been once again funded by the Queensland Government through its *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* initiative, under its Community Work Skills program.

"Registrations have opened for Haulout Driver Training today. We have been running these on-farm courses for almost 20 years. For most of that time, it has been funded through the Queensland Government, for which we are very thankful," said Mackay Canegrowers Chairman Joseph Borg.

"That ongoing support is recognition of the immense value to the industry in skilling twenty new harvest workers every year, ensuring that over the four days of the course they have the opportunity to get behind the wheel of haulout vehicles alongside highly experienced grower trainers, learn the basic skills of driving, harvest procedures and most importantly, safety.

Thanks to the *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* funding, there is no charge to participants, with wrap-around training extending to support participants to obtain work in the industry with growers and contract harvesters actively seeking employees.

"It's a four-day boot camp with real-life grower trainers, getting behind the wheel of tractors. On top of that, we have an accredited trainer-assessor on-site, taking the trainees through RTO-backed units towards the Cert II Agriculture. It's a great starting point for people wanting to work in ag, and particularly the sugarcane harvest," said Mr Borg.

To deliver training in 2026, Mackay Canegrowers is working with RTO Ausintec Academy Pty Ltd, and local accredited Trainer Assessor Earl Nielsen, who has successfully delivered the course's Cert II units in the past, and has strong cane industry experience.

Member for Whitsunday and Minister for Families, Seniors and Disability Services Amanda Camm, and Member for Mirani Glen Kelly have shown strong support for the training program.

"It's great to see programs like this delivering practical training and real pathways into employment for local jobseekers," Ms Camm said.

"Our sugar industry is the backbone of many regional communities, and initiatives like *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* are helping ensure we have the skilled local workforce needed for the future."

Mr Kelly agreed: “Central Queensland’s sugar industry has a bright future, but the long-term success of our region depends on making sure we keep building a skilled, safe and job-ready workforce.”

“On-farm training, practical experience and strong safety culture are the bedrock of primary industries across Queensland, and programs like this are helping set people up with the real skills employers are looking for,” Mr Kelly said.

A success story from the 2025 Haulout Driver Training was Samantha Honey, a 42-year-old single mother of two, keen to skill up and return to the workforce.

“I’ve only really been a mum, a support worker and a carer to my daughter with disabilities. So, I didn’t really have any skills or anything,” Samantha said.

“When the Haulout Driver Training course came up, I knew the cane hauling was six months, so I was like: I can give that a go.”

With experience as a support care worker, Samantha had never driven heavy machinery. With support from the experienced team of grower trainers and the space of the farm used for training, she succeeded.

“I was actually pretty nervous to get in the tractor, but they stepped us through, showed us everything and then it was: ‘Let’s go, just take off slowly’. It wasn’t as hard as I imagined.”

Samantha secured work within a fortnight, with her employers extending her experience before the start of the crush. She was able to find work a little closer to home as the crush progressed, and will come back to the same harvest contractor for the 2026 crush. She said she had seen how the industry had a need for many haulout drivers.

“I didn’t have the background for it at all. I would just say give it a go because it’s a little bit to pick up to start with, but it’s actually not as hard as you think it is,” Samantha recommended.

And the job?

“Some days, the hours are a little bit long, but it’s actually a pretty good job!”

Get in touch with Mackay Canegrowers to express interest in Haulout Driver Training. Twenty places are available for the two courses, starting May 12 and 19, with an orientation day for both courses on May 11. Call 4944 2600, or email mackay@canegrowers.com.au. You can also learn more and email your EOI from www.mackaycanegrowers.com.au, under the training tab.



From left, Mackay Canegrowers Chairman Joseph Borg and DTET’s Helene Goody congratulate Samantha Honey at her 2025 course completion

This training is proudly funded by the Queensland Government through its *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* initiative.