

Regional Employers Alliance Project - Central Highlands, Queensland
Completion Report: 1 December 2008

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Completion & Activity Report

August

19 August	Cover letter introducing REAP and aims of project, copy of survey, REAP general information flyer posted to all civil construction businesses in Central Highlands
25-29 August	Phone and face-to-face interviews conducted with Civil Contracting employers
Ongoing	Collection of visitor surveys and supply of surveys Traveller survey data entry and analysis

September

1 September	Mining sector database revisited and updated
3-5 September	Civil survey data analysis and Interim Report completed
Ongoing	Collection of visitor surveys and supply of surveys Traveller survey data entry and analysis

October

3-13 October	Face-to-face interviews, and one phone interview, conducted with Central Highlands mining businesses
10 October	½ day strategy meeting, Tony Robinson, Skills Formation Strategy: Project Officer, CHDC
15 October	Meeting, Peter Dowling, General Manager, CHDC
16-17 October	Mining survey data analysis and Interim Report completed
23-26 October	Capacity survey of all CH Caravan Parks via telephone questionnaire
24 October	Meeting, Ngaire Merrifield, Visitor Information Centre Coordinator
27 October	Meeting, Tanya Rouse, Acting HR Manager, CHRC REAP Phase 3 Proposals developed for Stakeholder Meeting
29 October	REAP Stakeholder Committee Meeting at Central Highlands Regional Council offices, Emerald; 9.00am – 2.30pm Peter McDuff, DETA Skills Formation Strategy attended as observer
31 October	Traveller survey data entry and collection concluded

November

5-14 November	Traveller survey data analysis and Interim Report completed
10 November	Meeting, Rowen Harvey, HR Manager. BMA Gregory Crinum
24 November	Council Case Study text, images and presentation completed
26 November	Presentation of Findings; REAP National Forum, Melbourne

A comprehensive research report: *A Seasonal Skilled Workforce: Considering Central Highlands Travellers (December 2008)* will be completed 10 December 2008 and available for circulation.

Outcomes

A summary of the outcomes from each industry sector research activity follows. For a comprehensive discussion of findings, see the REAP final research report: A Seasonal Skilled Workforce: Considering Central Highlands Travellers (December 2008).

Agricultural Sector Outcomes

107 businesses were sampled during AgGrow from 10 to 12 July 2008, representing operations on 1,004,343 Ha or 19.5%, nearly 1/5th of the total land under agricultural production in the Central Highlands. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with Craig Pressler, 2PH Farms, 7 April 2008 to develop an agricultural sector case study.

64% of sampled agricultural businesses in the Central Highlands operate with current vacancies. At 12 July 2008, reported vacancies totaled 79 fulltime positions (22% of the total fulltime workforce sampled) and 23 part-time casual positions. More than a quarter of all businesses had between half and all of their positions empty. The mean average length of vacancies reported was 9.9 months; 42% of businesses sampled reported unfilled vacancies of 1 and ½ years or greater.

Significant impacts were reported by respondents on productivity, ability to use technology, damage to equipment and the social wellbeing of the family unit. The latter included the inability to go to the doctor, and being forced to take children from school to help when the workload is heaviest.

While vacancies were reported across all occupations with the exception of property managers, farmhand positions were the hardest to fill; 66% of full time and 26% of part time positions are vacant. Specific skills across agricultural enterprises that were commonly listed as being difficult to source included mechanical, computer, farm-engineering, carpentry/building maintenance, and those with truck or other specific licences.

Reported heaviest workloads by a number of industries match the window of tourist visitors to the Central Highlands. These include duties such as weaning, branding and mustering by cattle producers, tasks associated with planting winter crops and harvesting summer crops for grain producers, and some horticultural tasks. However, all businesses reported needing help in down periods for maintenance and repairs.

Analysis of the data has shown an industry sector that is keen to try new ways of employment to attract skilled people into their businesses:

- 87% would consider short –term contracts
- 68% would consider employing people on job-share arrangements
- 86% are able to offer accommodation to employees

A significant number, 85% have asked to be included and informed about a potential seasonal workforce program with older, skilled workers.

Civil Contracting Sector Outcomes

52 of 61 (85%) civil contracting businesses based in the Central Highlands Regional Council area, or conducting substantial operations, were surveyed via telephone or in person from 25-29 August 2008. A semi-structured, face to face interview with Shayne Shepherd, Shepherd Diesel and Chris Vine, C&J Excavator Hire was conducted 3 June 2008 to develop an civil construction sector case study.

Most Central Hire civil contracting businesses operate 'wet hire' businesses. 'Wet hire' describes the hiring of machinery with an operator and in some circumstances includes fuel. The local industry is characterised by a wide range of business sizes and plant fleets.

Contract workloads can fluctuate dramatically throughout the year; reflected in the total workforce figures provided for the 12 months to August 2008, ranging from 539 to 1075 staff. The largest occupation represented in the workforce is plant operators, comprising 46% of the total civil contracting workforce, and 71.5% of the part time/casual workforce.

72.5% of businesses sampled reported current vacancies. 162 (29%) of full time and 26% of the part time casual positions were unfilled. Plant operators comprised the highest number of vacancies; 28% and 47% of full time and part time positions respectively. The average length of vacancy reported was 6 months, however vacancies of 1 month to 5 years were listed. 1 year was the most commonly reported length of vacancy.

Small to medium civil contracting businesses are reporting a critical inability to attract and retain skilled labour which is impacting on their ability to undertake work, suppressing business growth and affecting productivity and income. Vacancies impose a critical loss to civil businesses. Their ability to tender or accept available work is reduced while idle machine and plant continues to incur overhead costs such as lease payments. Vacancies occur throughout the year including the peak travelling season.

76% of all respondents stated they were unable to find suitably skilled labour. This included one employer of greater than 100 staff. Small to medium sized employers described their frustration at the loss of newly trained staff to larger companies and mines, and their difficulty in competing with mine wages and packages. Most businesses are training staff on site.

Participating civil contracting businesses showed a strong interest in the project:

- 78% of respondents indicated they would employ skilled staff on contracts for 1 month or more
- 44% were interested in pursuing job-share arrangements

72% of employers and an additional two owner operators registered their interest in the resources of a travelling skilled workforce, and asked to be supplied with further information.

Mining Sector Outcomes

7 mining enterprises were interviewed in face-to-face interviews and 1 interview was conducted via telephone accompanied by email responses between 3 to 13 October 2008. Using the overall saleable coal figure for the Central Highlands of 58.8 Mtpa (DME 2007), the proportion of coal production represented by respondents is 71%. An interview was conducted with Michael Gavin, former Human Resources Manager, BMA Gregory Crinum, to compile a mining sector case study.

Mining employed an estimated total mining workforce of 6015 at January 2008 (DM&E 2008). This makes it the largest industry sector employer in the Central Highlands. A substantial proportion (73%), of the workforce employed by participating mines, is engaged in production, development or other machinery operating roles. Contractors are an integral part of all mining operations, particularly supporting maintenance, development and production aspects of the business. In the participating mines, contractors comprise 66% of the total labouring workforce.

Through competitive salary packaging, high wages and in some cases, choices of roster, mines have positioned themselves as an employer of choice in the Central Highlands. All mines reported very low vacancy rates, some as low as 1.5%, and have little difficulty in attracting new staff.

The consensus from all mines was that many of their new employees are sourced from contractors that are already known to them, or have come from another mine. Participating mines were not untouched by the region's labour shortage; A number commented that they would normally take on all skilled tradespeople and operators but were now employing up to 50% of employees without mine experience.

Predictions on the total size of the mining workforce over the next 10 years are contradictory. However, without a greater population to draw upon, mines may find recruiting staff increasingly difficult with three new mines planned for development within the next five years within the Central Highlands, and significant advanced development in adjacent regions.

All mining operations are governed by the Queensland Coal Mining Safety and Health Act (1999) and its subordinate legislation; the Coal Mining Safety and Health Regulation 2001. Strict licensing and site-specific safety requirements excludes mines from using transient workers and/or recognising common skill sets between mines.

While there may be no direct benefit to mines in participating in REAP, the additional labour brought to the region through encouraging transient workers will provide labour for contractors. This is of substantial indirect benefit to the mining industry not only due to their reliance on contractors for ongoing operations, but also as they tend to recruit from contractors providing services to the business.

Central Highlands Regional Council: Outcomes

Face-to-face interviews and meetings have been undertaken with the following Council staff:

- 3 April, Bryan Ottone, CEO, Central Highlands Regional Council
- 15 May: Jenny Nuss, Human Resources Manager
- 23 June: Bryan Ottone, CEO
- 27 October: Tanya Rouse, Acting HR Manager
- 29 October: George Frangos, Deputy CEO

Termination and employment records have also been provided by the Council for the period 2005 – 2008 for the Central Highlands Regional Council and former shires Emerald, Bauhinia, Peak Downs and Duaringa.

CHRC covers 60,643.2 km² and is one of the largest non-mine employers in the Central Highlands. Its central office and the majority of staff (185) are located in Emerald. Staff also work across the Central Highlands based from Capella, Blackwater, Springsure, Duaringa, Tieri and Rolleston.

CHRC provides a diverse range of services which are divided into key operational areas: Corporate Services, Civil Operations, Commercial Services, Environment and Planning, and Governance and Community Services.

A total of 442 full time permanent and 54 casual staff were employed in May 2008. More than half of the casuals have been employed on a long-term basis. The largest proportion of staff (49%) is employed in manual, trade or 'outside' labour roles in the Civil Operations Department.

Council is affected by the labour shortage primarily in the areas of skilled machinery and plant operators. In May, Civil Operations was working with 46% vacancies across the department. There is a high turnover in these roles. In the former Emerald Shire Council region between April 2005 and September 2008, the average length of employment for plant operators, truck drivers and labourers was just greater than 6 months. In this time 84 people resigned from these positions, many of them long-term employees of average 15 years experience with the Council.

Other occupations which remain particularly challenging for Council to fill with suitably skilled staff are Treatment Plant Operators, Plumbers, Mechanics and Building Site Inspectors. CHRC has also found so far that generally regional locations are harder to fill.

CHRC provides various benefits to support and retain its staff. The wages offered are, on average, 25% above the relevant awards, however the amount is still not a high wage for skilled labour in comparison to other industries. CHRC also provides a flexible workplace to support families via additional leave for outside workers, Rostered Days Off and negotiable hours.

On 15th March 2008, the shire councils of Bauhinia, Duaringa, Emerald and Peak Downs were amalgamated to form the Central Highlands Regional Council (CHRC). While, historically, positions have been full time and permanent, a practice backed by a highly unionised workforce (approximately 60%), the amalgamation has produced the need for contract and project staff. A Transition Action Plan has been developed which lists the tasks needed for the organisation to

adjust to its amalgamated structure. The Plan will require policy, local laws, industrial relations and human resources procedures to be documented and implemented, and while existing Council staff have the expertise and corporate knowledge to carry out these tasks, given the existing shortages and the additional work loads created by amalgamation, more staff are required to carry out specific tasks.

Within areas sustaining highest vacancies such as Civil Operations and Commercial Services, some traditional work practices may require a shift in attitudes and on-the-job hierarchies.

The CHRC has eleven 'camps' in locations across the Central Highlands, which could supply temporary accommodation with free water and power to caravans and motorhomes. Sites in some areas require some upgrading but could then be acceptable to a wider range of travellers.

Some contracting is used successfully by Council to-date. While REAP has focused on skilled plant and machinery operators, with the Council's wide range of jobs and work locations, contracting of skilled travellers could contribute to nearly all operations and provide needed support to amalgamation requirements. Contracts with exact start dates could be advertised widely, and, in many cases, work for a partner could also be made available.

Central Highlands Traveller Survey: Interest in Work, Skills, and Motivation to Work in the Region

The Central Highlands Traveller Survey was undertaken between 1 May and 31 October 2008; six months of data collection correlating with the peak visitor season in the Central Highlands.

Six Central Highlands accommodation providers and tourism businesses were approached and/or offered to distribute, promote and collect surveys from their clients. This included all caravan parks in and close to Emerald, and businesses run by the Chair and Deputy Chair of Central Highlands Tourism Inc.

194 traveling parties participated in the Central Highlands Traveler Survey between 1 May and 30 October 2008. An additional 6 surveys were not included as they were returned by residents of the Central Highlands. Visitors sampled represent only 2.53% of the 19,540 visitors recorded at the Central Highlands Visitor Information Centre during the same period.

Findings from *A Seasonal Skilled Workforce: Considering Central Highlands Travellers* indicate there are a significant proportion of visitors to the region for whom combining work and travel is an appealing proposition.

There are three major groups who appear from survey results:

- International and particularly Asian visitors aged between 18 and 34 who are undertaking fruit picking and pruning duties while studying or holidaying
- Domestic visitors from regional Queensland, NSW and Victoria aged between 45 and 64 who are employed or self funded retirees holidaying in the region with a caravan or motorhome
- Domestic visitors who are employed or itinerant aged between 35 and 54 who are working in the Central Highlands with their own vehicle often with a caravan

Nearly all domestic visitors travel with a partner or a group of adult friends or relatives.

Of all respondents who indicated they would return to the Central Highlands, 43% stated they would be interested in undertaking paid work.

Domestic visitors were skilled in a diverse range of occupations. The strongest areas of formally recognised skills were in the fields of truck driving and plant and machinery operations. More than one third of domestic visitors interested in work held Light Rigid or heavier class licenses. Other skill areas commonly listed were education, health and care, and welding, fitting and turning. 96% of all qualifications listed were current.

Preferred means of communication included internet and email, printed press, the Visitor Information Centre and word of mouth. Visitors nominated a number of aspects critical to their decision to undertake work:

- Prompt, regular payment of wages
- A fair wage provided which reflects the hours and skills of work undertaken
- Availability of a caravan or campsite
- Low or moderate cost accommodation (International only)
- Clean and secure accommodation (International only)
- Access to medical facilities (Domestic only)
- A clear understanding of the level of fitness required for work (Domestic only)

For couples, work for their spouses or partners was also considered very important.

Paid work would influence nearly all visitors' travel plans with a third travelling to new or different places, 40% travelling more often and half for longer periods of time. International visitors indicated a preference for a period of work of average 6.9 months, and domestic visitors 4.3 months. 68% of domestic visitors stated they would prefer contracts of 3 months or more.

While the 'drive' market state-wide appears to be declining, tourism figures for the Central Highlands are strong and have grown consistently since 2002.

Significant Identified Barriers & Recommendations

Limited caravan park capacity is currently available in the Central Highlands to house 'long-stay' visitors, however significant expansion of a number of facilities will be completed by 2009. Additional capacity may be available from on-farm sites, if local regulations allow, and via the potential use of Council camp sites.

Recommendation: Council formally requested to modify regulations so that one caravan / motorhome can be allowed per rural or rural residential block with appropriate water, power etc

Recommendation: Council assess maintenance of camp sites and their viability as short-term accommodation for those looking to combine work and holiday within the scheme.

Coal Mining Safety and Health Regulation 2001 is subordinate legislation to the Queensland Coal Mining Safety and Health Act (1999). Part 11 (Pages 64-66) prescribes training requirements for mine workers which significantly limits the portability of workers between mines. The legislation requires the mine to ensure that employees are aware of the different types of operating procedures and work hazards on-site. It also requires that all employees have demonstrated their competency on any machinery they operate. As each mine site has its own

Standard Operating Procedures, there is no portability for employee competencies between mines. Competencies are site specific; an executive can only assess workers as competent at their own mine, as they are unlikely to have intimate knowledge of how another mine operates. The Act doesn't prescribe responsibilities for companies; all responsibility is based at the senior site executive level, so that individual has ultimate responsibility for everyone on their site.

Recommendation: That REAP outcomes are communicated to the Queensland Resources Council and Minerals Council of Australia to inform policy discussion on this legislation; this is not so much to enable REAP opportunities, but more to communicate the difficulty mines face in finding individuals who would consider this level of responsibility, and the relative lack of responsibility the legislation lays on the organisation.

Significant negative feedback was received from the travelers who had used a website site to find work with a corporate farm near Emerald; upon arriving their start and finish times, and their wage was not as advertised on the site. The strong role work-of-mouth plays within the traveling population was evident by the extension of these travelers experience in surveys received from other domestic visitors. Comments were also made regarding the potential for poor work practices in the civil construction industry to pose a barrier to the success of REAP.

Recommendation: A matching process would need to have equal focus on the supply side of the potential workforce, and so quality of work practices must be a focus for the scheme, in addition to feedback and evaluation mechanisms to identify potential problems quickly and take action.

Recommendation: A workplace induction must be provided for workers by participating employers.

Stakeholder Proposal Developed to Build on REAP Outcomes

The next phase of REAP is to set up a job matching program to attract Central Highlands visitors considering working and holidaying in the region. It is considered integral to the proposal's success that it be operational in time to service employers and visitors in the 2009 peak tourist season starting April.

The program would be comprised of an information and registration system, supported by communication and evaluation for employer members:

- A website and database that allows a job and time match to be made between interested visitors and employers, with communication options via email, mobile text, or phone contact;
- A website that provides information about job opportunities and the high quality experience with participating employers, accessible both in home and at the Visitor Information Centre;
- A system of membership that ensures employer work practices do not damage the integrity of the program and that helps meet visitor expectations

There are several different types of ways the website and database would be used, depending on who seeks the job 'match':

- Holiday makers planning ahead for a long trip or regular visitors to the area
- Holiday makers or itinerants who are on the road
- Those who arrive in the Central Highlands without jobs

- REAP employers seeking to fill vacancies

The website would be accessed through the Central Highlands website (www.centralhighlands.com.au) and through links from other work/travel sites and tourism sites. Holiday makers planning a trip or regular visitors would be able to enter their relevant work history and interests directly through the webpage to be included on a database should a suitable matching job come up with REAP employers.

The website will be promoted and accessible via the computer at the Visitor Information Centre in Emerald. The webpage would display what types of jobs were available currently (but not the specific contacts of the employer) or available in future so that they can be viewed by those visiting or approaching with internet access. The database would have the ability to send alerts of suitable job matches via text to mobile (or email if preferred) to those who register their interest on being placed on a regular visitor list, or those on the road.

The web and database is supported by a person who acts as a gatekeeper and personalizes the service. REAP employers with vacancies would be alerted by email or phone if preferred when a visitor with relevant skills to those requested was available.

Principles

There are some key principles guiding the service and membership:

- Central Highlands specific – only promotes work opportunities within the Central Highlands Regional Council boundaries
- Focus on visitors
- Quality Work Practices - REAP Employers are Central Highlands 'Employers of Choice'
- Not-for-profit
- User-pays
- Decisions made by those who pay for it (ie: members)

Conditions of Membership & Work Quality Guarantee

Those employers using the service agree to provide;

- Accurate start and finish dates for work
- Prompt payment
- Rates of pay are upfront and transparent (eg. no hidden costs or discounts)
- An induction for their employees through the scheme

Employer members would also be required to allow themselves to be ranked by travellers using the work scheme. The way in which Ebay provides a ranking for those selling on its site is similar. This provides significant advantages including:

- The ability to show that it is the users of the scheme who identify our employers as being very good
- Weeds out any poor employers who would damage the service for others
- Provides a check for the system so that if something goes wrong it can be followed up
- Provides a very strong marketing advantage and point of difference from other advertising-based web services.

Employees would rank employers out of a possible 5 stars on the provision of:

- Accurate start and finish dates for work
- Prompt payment

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- Transparent rates of pay
- Expectations are clear from both sides and met
- Suitability of accommodation site if applicable
- Overall experience

Structure

The next phase of REAP will sit under CHDC but be governed and directed by employer members.

Costs

A two tiered system of cost recovery is suggested:

Foundation Members would have exclusive membership option for the first 2 years – this is to recognize the higher risk of investing in a start up operation, and increase the likelihood of employers gaining suitable workforce during the programs start up.

- Agricultural businesses with full time equivalent staff of 5 or less \$2,500 per year
- Civil Contracting businesses with full time equivalent staff of 10 or less \$2,500 per year
- All businesses with full time equivalent staff of 6 or more (or 11 for Civil businesses) \$10,000 per year

This amount and membership breakdown is to be reviewed after the first year's operation. In addition, a small placement fee of \$100 would be charged for each visitor placed with an employer.

Referring to the proposed budget, the program would need approximately 8 - 10 larger business members and 11-18 smaller businesses to cover all start up costs, if no supporting funding can be sourced.

Action Plan:

Following is a list of actions required to get the program running in time for peak visitor season 2009. It includes commitments of the Regional Project Manager for the current research phase.

What	When	Who
Council formally requested to modify regulations so that one caravan / motorhome can be allowed per rural or rural residential block with appropriate water, power etc	Request sent by 12 December; Aim to have formal position by 30 January 2009	Liz Alexander Chris Rolfe / Ian Burnett - AgForce George Frangos / Cameron Fraser CHRC
More detailed Action Plan/Task list for start up completed to allow tendering for contracts	12 December	Liz Alexander
Tenders advertised for all services needed	15 December	Tony Robinson CHDC / DETA REAP Steering Group
Program support person appointed – role to include project management during start up	12 January	CHDC / REAP Steering Group
Database constructed/adapted	27 February	To be contracted
Website created	27 February	To be contracted

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Fuel cards for winners and updates sent to all who completed traveller surveys with new website information	27 February	Tony Robinson CHDC / DETA
Launch of program prepared and event run Communication plan and networks established	27 February	To be contracted
Interactive unit set up at Visitor Information Centre	31 March	To be contracted
Generic Induction package prepared as guide for employer members	31 March	To be contracted
Simple evaluation plan prepared so that reporting of results is built into the system	20 February	To be contracted

Other action items of benefit would be to set up a simple information sheet with information on medical facilities available, and other services specifically used by travellers with cars and caravans. The Visitor Information Centre has also indicated that REAP information for international travellers would be most applicable if available in Korean and Japanese languages.

Budget

As Word of Mouth was listed as the key means of communication, the program would build until expected full operation in its 3rd year. Funding is not provided for paid advertising; promotion would rely on circulation of newsworthy media releases and word-of-mouth. Figures provided are estimates.

Action Item	Year 1 (2009)	Year 2 (2010)	Year 3 (2011)
Database set up & maintenance	\$50,000+	\$5000	\$5000
Website set up & maintenance	\$5,000	\$1,000	\$1,000
Upgrade computer at Visitor Information Centre	\$10,000	n/a	n/a
Launch of program, communication plan	\$20,000	n/a	n/a
Generic Induction package set up	\$20,000	n/a	n/a
Evaluation plan & reporting	\$10,000	\$5000	\$5000
Start up project management	\$10,000	n/a	n/a
Ongoing program support & communication	\$40,000	\$40,000 – figure may vary depending on increasing workload	\$40,000 – figure may vary depending on increasing workload
CHDC administration & audit fees	\$15,000	\$5000	\$5000

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TOTALS	\$180,000	\$56,000	\$56,000
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Stakeholder Involvement and Commitment

Altogether, three face-to-face stakeholder meetings were held during Phase 2, 2008, hosted by the Central Highlands Regional Council in their executive rooms or by the Central Highlands Development Corporation:

- 3 April
- 23 June
- 29 October

An email distribution list with all members and other interested businesses / individuals was used extensively by the group throughout Phase 2. Considering the long traveling distances (up to 2 hours) required for some businesses to attend meetings in Emerald, and the varying peak workloads for each sector, this was a very successful strategy for engaging communication between members and the Project Manager.

Stakeholders worked cooperatively and non-competitively for mutual outcomes, in a respectful but frank environment. All industry sectors were represented at meetings, bar the final meeting where the representatives from civil contracting were unable to attend but provided significant input via phone beforehand.

Nearly all stakeholder committee members have formally committed, including financially, to build and initiate the project in 2009, according to the cost structure suggested in this document:

- Central Highlands Regional Council
- Ensham Resources, via Comet
- Minerva Mine, via Springsure
- BMA Billinton Gregory Crinum Mine
- 2PH Farms
- Shepherd Diesel

Three landholders who are not on the committee have already indicated they would like to be involved. Rio Tinto Kestrel is also considering the proposal favourably and we expect to hear from them shortly. The only stakeholder who appears not able to participate as a member is the Australian Agricultural College Corporation (Emerald) who stated that they would like to be involved, but would only be able to pay a small amount (not \$10,000) and that they would need to be able to advertise all their campuses, not just the Emerald campus.

An estimated \$70,000 has already been secured from members of the stakeholder committee to fund the project.

A summary of the proposal and an invitation to participate is being emailed on Wednesday 3 December to the 91 agricultural businesses and 23 civil contracting businesses that participated during the research phase and indicated they would like to know more about the project. The stakeholder committee hopes that this will source further significant funding to start and run the project.