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Could the solution to the fuel crisis be growing under farmers' noses?



By [Celia Freeman](#)
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Mackay sugarcane and hemp grower Joe Muscat said better mandates are required to encourage producers to grow crops for biofuel production. Picture by Steph Allen

[As fuel prices soar](#) and talk of possible shortages as a result of the Middle East crisis grows, a solution could be as simple as growing the fuel for the very tractor that plants the crop.

Mackay grower Joe Muscat called on the federal government to implement a fuel mandate, and argued that growing hemp and sugarcane for biofuels was one way to help secure the nation's fuel supply.

On March 19, the price of diesel in North Queensland was at a high of 295.9 cents a litre in Atherton, 302.9c/l in Charters Towers, 301.9c/l in Townsville, 299.9c/l in Nebo, 308.9c/l in Winton, 307.9c/l in Richmond and 309.9c/l in Mount Isa.

In a written statement, dated March 13, Energy Minister Chris Bowen said the federal government would release 20 per cent of the baseline Minimum Stockholding Obligation for petrol and diesel to ease fuel supply disruptions.

"This will allow the release of up to 762 million litres of petrol and diesel from Australia's domestic reserves, where these can be targeted towards localised market disruption," he said.

Mr Muscat, who grows 300ha of cane and around 10ha to 15ha of industrial hemp, said a government mandate was essential to drive industry growth and provide the certainty required for investment.

The long-time producer expressed frustration with the slow pace of policy change regarding ethanol, a renewable fuel that could be blended with petrol or processed into diesel substitutes.

"Ethanol fuel runs cleaner, so it's got less emissions ... that's why I can't understand why the government has never mandated it," he said.

"We're all looking for a better environment and ethanol is one that can deliver cleaner emissions and run cleaner through your engine.

"It's logical, it can be done, it is being done in a number of countries already."

Mr Muscat pointed to Brazil, where a sugarcane ethanol industry had thrived for 25 years.

"The real difference is why it's been done in Brazil and not here in Australia is that there was never a mandate to use that fuel."



📷 Rick Edwards said hemp could help solve Australia's fuel supply risk. File picture

Like others, Mr Muscat has concerns that biofuel would compete with food production, adding that the industry currently lacked the scale to support a massive program without significant state intervention.

"You would need more land and you'd need, obviously, growers that were capable of producing [cane and hemp]," he said.

"The opportunity is there, but with any of this, without government support in the way of mandates, and managing tariffs around the industry it will never happen."

W8ST renewable and waste-to-energy specialist Rick Edwards said the technology needed was now scalable, meaning it was no longer just a solution for industrial sized operations.

He said this meant the "end of the power line" regional economies could become energy self-sufficient.

"There's lots of things that can happen in this space, you don't have to divert all of your production to either fuel or food," he said. "You can actually look at doing that at a scalable level that can help offset demand for liquid fuels, as well as demand for power generation."

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Mr Edwards said the goal was a "blended fuel" to farm production, where technology was tailored down to small sizes suitable for individual hemp or sugarcane farmers.

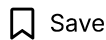
"There's lots of options for them to get in at a small scale and then start to progress once they feel confident that they're making their money back and they're able to contribute to their local communities," he said.

Mr Edwards said a farmer would have a lot of biomass on their property even after they had harvested the cane.

"They don't need the entirety of the cane product itself, they can produce other types of liquid fuels from gas," he said.

"You do have trash as a part of your biomass which you have available on your farm, it's not necessarily having to divide your farm in half," he said.

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