

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Chairman's push to prove anyone can achieve BMP accreditation

By John Flynn

Increasing the rate of grower participation in the industry-driven best practice program, Smartcane BMP, is a key priority for CANEGROWERS Chairman Paul Schembri in 2017.

Having recently achieved accreditation on the Mackay district cane farms he works with his brother Joe, he's now eager to bust some myths surrounding Smartcane BMP by demonstrating how those less computer-savvy farmers can engage in the process.

With the world watching, participation in Smartcane BMP is the industry's way of getting a message out to the community and key markets about the good work farmers are doing to protect the Great Barrier Reef.



PICTURED (above): Mackay cane growers Paul and Joe Schembri used a low-tech mix of hard data and mostly hand-drawn maps to record farming practices as part of their Smartcane BMP accreditation.

Bulk sugar freighters at anchor off the Port of Mackay, with their distinctive red hulls, are visible from the patio of the Schembri family home in the hills of Farleigh.

There's an obvious sense of pride as the CANEGROWERS Chairman glances towards the distant harbour - pride in an industry that has a history of beating the odds to deliver what is now a \$2.5 billion export-driven injection into the Australian economy each year.

The industry underpins the economic and social tapestry of North Queensland's coastal towns and cities.

It's a story that started with Thomas Henry Fitzgerald and John Spiller and their earliest plantings of sugarcane on alluvial flats surrounding the Pioneer River at the back end of the 19th century.

In 2017 the industry is facing challenges; challenges which, if not managed with steady hands and an innovative approach, could spell disaster.

"We've been around for 150 years," Paul says.

Watch our Virtual Bus Tour to the Schembri farm
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"BMP is important in that it's an opportunity to tell our story of environmental stewardship."

"We have grown to become one of the most efficient sugar industries in the world but we've faced some challenges.

"We're living in a contemporary society where we've got challenges around environmental and social sustainability and we accept that the global sugar industry is encountering the same challenges.

"We need to be environmentally sustainable and if you ask every farmer, they want to be environmentally sustainable, so BMP is important in that it's an opportunity to tell our story of environmental stewardship."

Smartcane BMP is the industry-driven Best Management Practice accreditation program.

It is a rigorous yet user-friendly protocol designed to guarantee the longer term environmental sustainability and profitability of farms adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

The key to its success according to Paul lies in achieving 'critical mass'.

That is a sizeable enough majority of growers embracing the program to ensure the outcomes in terms of measurable environmental gains are greater than the sum of individual farmer contributions.

Achieving critical mass in an industry with an ageing grower demographic where many growers harbour an overwhelming disdain for paperwork was never going to be an easy process.

That's not to say, as Paul points out, that growers aren't already progressive in their approach to environmental stewardship.

The way the industry has embraced green cane harvesting, trash blanketing and minimal till cultivation is the standout example of how cane farmers have quietly gone about the business of reducing their environmental footprint with minimal fuss over recent decades.

It's a farming system that ticked plenty of boxes when Paul and his brother Joe sat down last year to commence work on the three core modules of Smartcane BMP.

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Many farmers, according to Paul, will find themselves in a similar situation, already complying with the majority of benchmarks set out in the core modules.

As of 6 March 2017, 174 farms had achieved Smartcane BMP accreditation in the three core modules of Soil Health and Nutrition Management; Irrigation and Drainage Management; and Weed, Pest and Disease Management.

That equates to 47,506 hectares of cane land in the Great Barrier Reef catchment now independently assessed as achieving industry best practice.

At the same time, 1509 farms had proceeded at least as far as Smartcane BMP self-assessment, equating to nearly 264,423 hectares now actively engaging in Smartcane BMP.

It's a reasonable start but still a long way short of the critical mass of accredited growers needed to prove to government and the community that farmers are doing their best to protect the Reef.

"We farm 400,000 hectares adjoining the Great Barrier Reef and some people have described this as probably



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one of the most challenging environmental gigs on planet earth, but we're up for it," says Paul.

"I have this very strong and passionate belief that most farmers, all farmers in fact, are doing the right thing but our challenge is to tell the story of what we're doing and BMP is an opportunity to do that."

Achieving accreditation in Smartcane BMP is a challenge Paul believes is not as cumbersome or onerous as some growers may believe.

To prove that point, he set about completing the core modules in a manner that could best be described as 'old school', mostly without the need for computers.

At first glance, the folio containing the three core modules of Smartcane BMP for the Schembri farms gives the appearance of a senior high school geography assignment.

It's a mix of hard data and mostly hand-drawn maps layered over templates, with colour keys denoting application of various farm inputs.

It is functional and easy to interpret.

"I wanted to do it in a meaningful way in terms of a visual representation of what I was doing as a farmer so I struck upon the idea of doing it on the basis of layered maps," Paul says.

"I wanted to capture all the things I was doing as a farmer - my fertiliser, my chemical applications.

"I wanted to do something that was tactile so if I could sit down with a minister or whoever it might be, I could demonstrate that I was competent and I knew what I was doing as a farmer."

Using Mackay Sugar and Mackay Area Productivity Services block layouts as a template, highlighter pens were used to denote application of various farm inputs.

On one map, colours were allocated to identify different types of fertiliser being applied to blocks, another used colour coding to denote dates of application for specific rounds of nutrient.

Chemical application was depicted in a similar manner with different colours used to identify individual chemicals.

Template maps were also used to depict on-farm drainage and water flow across the farm.



Coupled with the visual elements was the hard data recorded in tabular form for nutrient and chemical application, including dates of chemical application, rate of application and wind speed.

It's these details that some farmers will find onerous, but Paul is quick to emphasise that record-keeping is a starting point on the BMP journey.

"Some farmers say, 'I don't know what to do around BMP where do I start this journey?' But if they just start keeping records they are almost getting to 90% of the journey," Paul says.

"Once you've got the bedrock of keeping the data and the records, the rest of it comes fairly easily.

"Now that I've built up our level of information and record-keeping the maintenance of it is relatively low, very minor."

Another point the CANEGROWERS Chairmans continues to emphasise is that Smartcane BMP's benchmarking system is not prescriptive.

If growers are using methods that vary from those outlined in individual modules, they're given the opportunity during

evaluation to demonstrate how those methods achieve best practice.

The incentive to complete Smartcane BMP isn't only about proving that cane growers are environmentally responsible.

Borrowing a phrase from another Mackay district farmer, Paul noted that measures put in place to reduce the impact of farming on the Reef also delivered an economic dividend to the grower.

The challenge now is in getting enough farmers involved to deliver real confidence in the industry.

"Success is the sum of all the small bits, the more people who participate create the aggregate result," Paul said. "We've got a powerful vested interest to make sure that we're farming sustainably.

"One of my colleagues always says to me the great thing about the sugar industry now is that the environmental driver and the economic driver line up.

"Best practice environmentally means optimum economic outcome for a farmer." ■



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PICTURED (above-left): Paul and Joe proudly display the Smartcane BMP accreditation certificate.