

TACKLING WATER EFFICIENCY WORK FROM THE GROUND UP

More than 40 cane growers and other industry stakeholders were given an opportunity recently to see firsthand the results of water efficiency work being delivered on MSF Sugar's Tableland farms.



The MSF Sugar Drip Irrigation Farm Walk was a collaboration between MSF Sugar and Netafim - a global leader in smart drip and micro-irrigation solutions and the supplier of the irrigation infrastructure being used.

The field day showcased the various stages of developing a sub-surface drip irrigation system, from installing a new system, to the harvest results of a crop grown under sub-surface irrigation.

MSF's Irrigation Supervisor Aaron Moore said drip irrigation was by far the better option for irrigating cane, subject to suitable soil types and the environment.

"With mounting pressure on our finite water resources across farming in general, the need for growers to use water more efficiently has never been greater," Mr Moore said.

"Growers chase yields, but in order to best utilise the water that is available to us, we need to be looking at more efficient methods of applying irrigation."

Sugarcane in the Tableland region has traditionally been grown using overhead or flood irrigation methods.

But as the level of Tinaroo Dam continued to fall towards 40%, MSF decided to tackle the water efficiency problem at the ground level.

While the company is a strong advocate of the proposed Nullinga Dam, which would provide enough water security for

growers to produce an additional 1.2 million tonnes of cane per year, MSF's Tableland Farms Operations Manager Rik Maatman said on-farm water efficiency was critical.

"It's no secret that sugarcane draws a great volume of water from the Mareeba-Dimbulah Irrigation Scheme for irrigation," Mr Maatman said.

"We acknowledge this and while we are lobbying heavily for additional water storage capacity at a government level, we are also looking at our own operations, where there are opportunities to improve water efficiency using sub-surface drip irrigation.

"Harvest is underway on one of the first blocks where plant cane and ratoon cane has been grown under sub-surface drip irrigation, and we are really pleased with the results so far."

Early results have shown a yield of 146 tonnes per hectare, using 7 megalitres/ha of irrigation, Mr Moore said.

"This gives us a water use efficiency of 12.6T/ML which compares favourably with our best results of 8.1T/ML using flood irrigation on our farms to date."

The public field day was held at MSF Sugar's flagship sub-surface drip irrigation project in Arriga and involved an information session and farm walks for more than 40 Tableland, Mossman and South Johnstone growers and industry representatives.



"We are growing bigger cane for the total volume of water applied. Fertigation is a big asset in drip irrigation."

Mr Maatman said he hoped growers came away with a better understanding of sub-surface drip irrigation and the benefits it could bring to their individual farming operations.

"The technology is proven to improve productivity where it was being used on MSF Sugar farms," he said.

"We are growing bigger cane for the total volume of water applied. Fertigation is a big asset in drip irrigation.

"Drip irrigation enables nutrients, fertiliser and chemicals to be injected directly into the root zone of the crop at any time during the year." ■

PICTURED: (left) Growers inspect the progress of laying tape for the sub-surface drip irrigation project at Mousa Farms, Arriga. (above) Harry Phillott (Mossman grower) and John Barbetti (BMP Tablelands coordinator).



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