

Reef Rescue scheme helps Burdekin precision farming



Longtime Burdekin cane grower Peter Lando is enthusiastic about precision farming. He has used a Reef Rescue grant to install a GPS system on his new JD6930 tractor. (Right): A highly manoeuvrable self-propelled spray unit built by Peter on his farm. Photo by Bill Kerr.



By Bill Kerr

The term 'precision farming' crops up a lot when you talk to longtime Burdekin grower Peter Lando.

Peter, 72, sees precision farming as a valuable way of saving costs and increasing efficiency, productivity and sustainability on his 240 ha irrigated farm on Hoey's Road at Brandon.

Peter and Mary Lando supply around 20,000 tonnes of cane a year to Pioneer Mill, produced on 1.83 m dual rows using a controlled traffic system. They began converting to wide dual rows four years ago and only have one remaining paddock of ratoons on 1.52 m rows. Son-in-law Jeff Hartwell helps run the farm; son Julian works at Newlands coal mine.

Stall numbers for draught horses that once worked the fields originally owned by the pioneering Hoey family are still visible on the old farm stables but today's focus is squarely on the use of cutting edge technology and best practice farming methods.

"Accuracy in farming is essential to economic survival these days, especially with increasing government regulation, and you can't get better than precision farming," says Peter.

"Water, fuel, fertiliser and electricity are all very expensive these days and we can't afford to waste them. We have to be spot on as much as possible in everything we do and controlled traffic helps us do that. Minimising crop inputs and keeping sediment and nutrients on the farm helps the bottom line and is good for the environment."

Peter is enthusiastic about the way the Federal Government's Reef Rescue

scheme helps growers review their practices and adopt better ways of doing things. He recently received a Reef Rescue second round grant from NQ Dry Tropics towards the cost of installing GPS on a new mid-range JD 6930 tractor for cultivation.

As well as saving time, labour, fuel and maintenance costs due to less distance travelled and fewer row turns, GPS guidance will allow him to put ▶



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fertiliser precisely where it needs to be to maximise benefit to plants while minimising likelihood of nutrients escaping off-farm. Precision farming will also enable him to present his drills in good condition for harvesting and to get back into the field sooner after rain.

Being able to cultivate, fertilise and carry out other jobs accurately using GPS fills a gap in Peter's farming program. Previously Peter had the benefit of GPS guidance in his planting and harvesting operations due to membership of the HCL Harvesting Pty Ltd cooperative but not in cultivating.

Peter and fellow Brandon growers Ian Haigh and Charlie Cacciola were original members when the cooperative was formed in 1994 seeking cost savings, more efficient use of capital and better quality control.

It now has six members and over time has evolved from a planting and harvesting co-op into a full service business able to provide a range of integrated best practice services that reduce growers' costs and improve productivity and sustainability. HCL has been a pacesetter for change in a district where heavy crops and almost universal furrow irrigation have tended to restrict adoption of radical new farming methods.

This year HCL's GPS-equipped Cameco 3510 harvester will cut around 100,000 tonnes. The group is converting to EHS-

built trailers able to carry three cane bins instead of the two that previously could be loaded on IHC road transport trucks. This will save on fuel and registration costs.

HCL creates raised beds with a custom-built 3-row bedformer and plants 1.83 m dual rows using a new Hodge disc opener billet planter hauled by a JD 8330 tractor guided by GPS. A smaller planter is used for areas not suitable for dual rows.

Two fulltime employees include a skilled mechanic from South Africa on a working visa. HCL operates from a large shed fitted with a GPS base station on the Lando farm.

Peter has adapted machinery to suit the new wide row system including conversion of a ratooning device into a zonal tillage implement and modification of a Bonel stool splitter fertiliser box.

Two years ago he converted a small tracked dumper truck into a highly maneuverable self-propelled spray unit that can get into wet fields earlier to apply post-emergence herbicides.

It is fitted with a 2000 litre tank, independent extendable booms that can cover nine rows at a time, an agitator that continuously mixes liquids and a Dickey John flow meter that ensures precise application and calculation of chemical usage.



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REEF RESCUE

Reef Rescue is aimed at addressing off-farm impacts on water quality by encouraging voluntary uptake of the latest technology and best practices.

The operator can fill the tank easily without coming into contact with chemicals. The unit has 1.2 m clearance and can be fitted with either droppers or Silvan legs. It can travel at about 9 km/hr.

The name Lando has been synonymous with Burdekin cane growing since the 1920s when Peter's father, John, and uncle, Tony, began farming.

Industry organisations sent Tony and two Ingham growers of Italian descent (Peter Lalli and FM Pavetto) to Italy in 1955 to secure urgently needed hand cutters for the harvest which was experiencing a manpower shortage.

As the family grew the business became Lando and Sons, developing into one of the district's largest farming enterprises.

Eventually it split into three separate family enterprises farming in three different areas. ■

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Apply now for the third round of Reef Rescue funding for the Wet Tropics. Applications close 19 July. Contact industry Extension Officers for details or visit www.terrain.org.au



A GPS unit on a new JD6930 tractor, partially funded by the federal Reef Rescue project, will streamline the controlled traffic system used by Pioneer mill supplier Peter Lando on his farm at Hoeyes Road, Brandon, benefiting productivity, efficiency and the environment.