

# Precision technology for Maryborough enterprise

By Gordon Collie

Investing in precision farming technology with funding assistance through the Federal Government's Reef Rescue Program makes good business sense for Maryborough cane grower Allen Birt.

Mr Birt, who farms in the Bidwill district, is confident the move will pay dividends in making an expanded cane production enterprise more efficient and sustainable.

By harvesting more tonnes of cane through leasing and contract farming with Maryborough Mill, Mr Birt is building his production base to justify investing in technology and also contributing to the future viability of the region.

Improved sugar prices have seen a return of confidence with new land being developed to offset lost production and ensure vital cane throughput for the mill.

Mr Birt has been successful in his funding application through the local productivity services committee to receive assistance in purchasing a tractor GPS steering kit which he hopes to have operational for the spring plant. A roving GPS unit will be leased locally initially with a view to purchasing his own in the future.

Mr Birt was an early mover from the traditional 1.5 metre row farming system, adopting wide single row technology eight years ago.

His farm is now set up on 1.7 m spacing with a wide 36 cm planting chute promoting dense cane stools. The GPS system will make for more



Allen Birt with the land plane he has adapted for clearing and development work towed behind a 160hp tractor. Photo by Gordon Collie.

accurate farming, helping to reduce soil compaction and reduce costs of farming operations and inputs, including chemical sprays.

Mr Birt said he had always strived to make his cane rows as long as possible

with a program of continuing use of a land plane and drainage works. This will help optimise the benefits of precision guidance.

The family has been farming in the district since 1968 and Mr Birt began ►

working with his father and brothers in 1979.

He now operates his own enterprise of 100 ha with another 100 ha leased.

He has now taken on the development of a new 70 ha block of former grazing country for the mill, with a view to contract farming once the crop is established.

Mr Birt cut almost 13,000 tonnes last season and expects his throughput to increase by 4000 to 5000 tonnes with new plantings coming into production.

Some of the new land has been readied for autumn planting until the end of April but most of the planned 110 ha total plant this year will be in the spring.

"More of our own farm than normal rotation is coming out in the next two years to get rid of smut susceptible varieties," Mr Birt said.

While the extremely wet start to the 2010 year has been generally welcomed, there have been delays getting onto ground and long periods of overcast weather have not been conducive to optimum crop development.

The big wet has followed an extended period of low rainfall in the second half of 2009.

"I've never seen it so dry in the five months leading up to Christmas.

"Despite heavy irrigation, the crop has lost yield potential," he said.

Mr Birt said the crop could make up yield providing the winter is mild and frosts don't chop off growth.

"While production will increase with expanded area under cane, it would be great to get good crop tonnage to take advantage of higher cane prices," Mr Birt said. ■



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For more information:  
Sugarcane Reef Rescue Coordinator  
Joseph Evans  
reef@canegrowers.com.au



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