

Chemical and fertiliser innovation



Phillip Deguara with the hooded sprayer. Photography by Ros Kirby

By Ros Kirby


Young Mackay cane grower Phillip Deguara is into innovation.

Taking part in the national Advance in Sugar Leadership Development

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Program in Cairns in 2008, Phil learnt that it wasn't just him who looked at the future of the industry with confidence.

The program focuses on developing leadership skills of the future leaders of the sugar industry.

"The program made me realise that other young people from all sectors share my positive outlook for the industry," Phil said.

And it is on farm where Phil has had a hand in building on farm innovation, including the implementation of new machinery that will increase efficiency and reduce the impact of farming on the environment.

In recent years, the Deguaras have gone to a fertiliser rate system that is decided on based on what each block needs.

"While we haven't really gone to a variable rate fertiliser application, it is all done block by block," says Phil.

"Why we went that way is it allows us to easily cut down on fertiliser where we don't need it, and increase the fertiliser where we do need it, depending on the different soils on each farm block.

"Also with all of the regulations coming in, we have to start to do it more and more – getting the fertiliser right for the soil types."

With the help of Reef Rescue funding, the Deguaras bought in their fertiliser applicator rig from Western Australia, where it was already set up to 1.8m row spacings.

"We had to modify it to suit our 1.9 m row spacings, and last year we added a variable rate controller to control the fertiliser," Phil says. ▶

"The system also maps the fertiliser. This year we are also going to use it to apply Confidor in the blocks we know have got grubs.

dry. You could only apply it from about 9 am and go to 4.30 pm, until the dew started forming and the old machines just used to bog up.

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Reef Rescue funding also helped the Deguaras invest in a 'Rain Controller' system including GPS, which is set up to do a number of jobs around the farm.

Phillip Deguara, Mackay grower

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"Going by the label, the Confidor has to be applied just beneath the ground and sealed off, so this machine will hopefully allow us to do that."

Phil says they went this way so they would have more choice in how they could apply their fertiliser.

"In the old 'days' you could only apply the fertiliser when the trash was really

"Hopefully with these new machines we can put the fertiliser on when we need to put it on. We don't have to wait until the trash is dry. Going that way has allowed us to do the Confidor applications as well."

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Phillip (L) and John Deguara, with Patrick Deguara in the driver's seat of the modified highrise sprayer.



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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.

They currently use it to run the fertiliser, to run the hydraulic valves for the planter, to apply Suscon where they need it for cane grub control, and to control the sprayer. Most important on farm jobs are done through the control system.

All of the information the system collects is then downloaded to Phil's laptop at home, where he can print off whatever reports he wants, at any time.

"For the Suscon Maxi [for cane grub control] this year, I made a map up because we have to come in exactly 100 m from the creek lines," Phil says. "From this map, as we were planting the Suscon, it was turning on and off depending on if we needed it there or not. This way I didn't have to apply the Suscon maxi to the whole paddock, so yeah that's a big saving there already."

The system took a lot of setting up, which they had to do themselves, but Phil says it was all worth it. They have installed a valve system which allows them to just 'plug in' each implement, be it the planter, fertiliser applicator or sprayer.

"What we did is put the hydraulic valves on the tractor itself. We can now just basically plug in the valve and go – we have one for every machine," says Phil.

This project was a partnership between The Australian Government's Reef Rescue program, Reef Catchments and CANEGROWERS. ■