

Best practice underpins sustainable production



Cane grower Bill Smith uses this zonal tillage implement designed by Ken Clarke and developed by Mulgrave Landcare as part of a best practice farming program on the northern outskirts of Cairns.

By Bill Kerr

Located right under the flight path to Cairns International Airport and hemmed in by busy roads, a creek and housing estates, Bill Smith's cane farming enterprise is well and truly feeling the urban squeeze but a management program based on best practice should ensure it remains a productive and sustainable part of the far north's sugar future.

He intends to keep growing cane as long as the industry remains viable in the district, using an up-to-the-minute farming system based on controlled traffic, wide rows, mounded planting, legume break crops and minimum tillage.

Using best practice is essential for growers operating so close to an expanding city environment but Bill considers that it makes sense, regardless of location because it contributes to profitability as well as minimising the effect of farming on the natural environment, particularly the Great Barrier Reef.

He believes that most cane growers try to farm responsibly but anyone wanting to continue in the business long-term needs to make time to take advantage of training workshops, information briefings and refresher courses when they become available. He makes every effort to ensure his

farming skills and accreditations are up-to-date eg. storage and use of farm chemicals, and to stay abreast of new management recommendations and industry developments.

"When you stop learning you're dead," says Bill, who says he always goes home with something worthwhile from every course he attends.

Bill has undertaken a mangrove management course as his farm is just 1 km from the coast and adjoins natural wetlands. The soils range from sand to sandy loams to mangrove mud, hence good mangrove management is a requirement of his farming practice.

To avoid friction with urban neighbours, Bill minimises activities that may give rise to complaints. Spraying activities are undertaken to minimise drift and cane is burnt only as a best management practice eg. heavy weed infestations. Experience has shown that pre-emergent herbicides do not work well and are inefficient in sandy soils so, to minimise runoff, knockdowns are preferred.

Bill, 53, operates San Remo Farming Co as a one-man operation for himself and his sisters Barbara Russell and Christine Forrester. The business got its name from nearby Holloway's Beach, which was called San Remo Beach in its early days. In addition to growing 64 ha of cane, he runs a Brahman beef cattle stud at Kuranda.

Bill's grandfather David Smart took up cane farming after migrating from Scotland in 1908. He originally had a cane farm at White Rock – near Ipswich.

After a rare good year, he went to Cairns with the intention of buying a racehorse but instead he bought Acacia Bank, the farm immediately adjacent to his current farm. Bill's mother and uncle bought the present farm in 1954 and Bill returned to the farm at age 21 after completing an agricultural course and a mechanical apprenticeship.

In the old days his grandfather was driven to breaking point by cane grub infestations on his White Rock farm but these days Bill faces many different pests. He says the Barron Delta has become infested with wallabies, particularly over the last five years. They eat plant cane to the ground then dig up the billets to eat the rest of the shoot. This year they destroyed around 20% of the crop, reducing the expected harvest from 5000 t to 4000 t.

Motorcycle riders also do damage, creating erosion, and therefore sediment run-off. However, a bigger threat is the potential loss of the tramway linking the area to Mulgrave Mill 25 km away. If anything happened to the rail bridge over the Barron River it would probably be too costly to replace and there would be opposition to transporting cane by road through the city.

At one stage, San Remo produced up to 10,500 t however in the late 1980s some land was sold for a sand quarry and the farm was reduced to its current size.

Because it is located in the Barron Delta, it can not be developed for residential purposes as it is flood prone. Good drainage and grassed headlands are essential for farming.

In 2006, Bill and John Westaway (nearby growers), were awarded a grant under the Water Quality Incentives Scheme in the wet tropics, aimed at minimising sources of contaminants exported to the Great Barrier Reef Lagoon.

This partly funded the construction of a zonal tillage implement designed by Ken Clarke and developed by Mulgrave Landcare. This implement only works the ground where cane is grown.

It comprises two opening discs followed by three rippers with four discs to throw soil back in, followed by a press roller.

Bill is confident that minimal amounts of sediment, fertiliser and chemicals leave the farm as a result of his farming practices. He says the core of best practice is reducing costs and improving productivity. Minimising outgoings by reducing fertiliser and chemical usage has the additional benefit of protecting the environment.

A 5-year development program including GPS guidance and controlled traffic will play an important role in minimising future compaction and erosion, as well as providing significant savings in fuel, time and wear and tear. In addition to this, the program includes progression to a variable rate fertiliser applicator. These improvements to



Mulgrave cane supplier Bill Smith uses best practice to grow cane on San Remo Farming Co's operation on the northern outskirts of Cairns.

farming practices became fast tracked as a result of Reef Rescue funding which helped him acquire a John Deere RTK GPS, providing auto steer for his JD 7610 tractor.

Bill then began converting the farm from 1.6 m to 1.8 m row spacing and using minimum till mound planting, courtesy of planting contractors Mark Savina and Mick Andrejic.

This year they planted 20 ha of his fallow with their newly acquired Mizzi mound billet planter. This was more than usual as he is trying to replace smut susceptible Q174.

Once the whole farm is under 1.8 m rows his management strategy will be to:

- Spray out cane for fallowing with Roundup.



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

- Zero till with direct drill cowpea/ legume crop (not soybeans because wallabies prefer to eat them).
- Spray out the legume crop with the aim of maximising nutrient input from the crop.
- Cultivate the soil with the zonal tillage implement to prepare the beds for planting.

The cane will be planted direct into the legume residue which enables savings in fuel, time and fertilisers. Only two passes with the zonal tillage implement will be needed instead of two rippings, a discing, a grubbing and a conventional rotary hoeing (season dependant).

It is evident that Bill's farming philosophy provides a win-win situation for sugarcane production and the environment. ■

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