

Reef Rescue helps target farm practice and water applications

Mackay grower Les Durnsford found that using GPS technology results in accurately planted rows, despite the undulation of the block

By Ros Kirby

Despite the recent announcements from Queensland State Premier Anna Bligh, the Durnsford family of Wagoora (65kms north of Mackay) believe they have always done a good job of protecting their land's yield potential.

"After all, we are still continuously working land my father first farmed in 1928," Les Durnsford said.

"Good farming is about knowing your soil and its variations and not stressing them while growing a good crop.

"We've always practiced a balanced proportion of fallow land between crops and been careful with fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides because they are so expensive to use and really cut into your bottom line if over-used.

"So we really don't need the State Government to tell us how to manage our land and it's a shame they are putting \$50 million into 'policing'

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The Durnsford family produces an average of 24,000 tonnes of cane annually on their four farms, with sons Paul and Jason fully involved. The other two sons, Brett and Mark have chosen to work away from the land.

"I've worked the farm since I left school and have watched with interest the changes in farming systems through the years," Les Durnsford said.

"I'm close to retirement now but will help the boys out while I can, to make the current round of changes in the system."

Les said the biggest change in cane growing was when green cane harvesting began in the 1980s.

"Green cane harvesting has so many benefits for the soil, with the trash blanket providing coverage during rain events so there is less erosion, inhibiting the growth of weeds in the cane fields and adding composted

nutrients to the soil. Once we had the machinery for green cane harvest, we used less chemical and herbicide control on the crop, which has to have been a benefit as there was a lift in the yield then as well."

because it's too early to tell, but certainly in less fuel usage and work time. Les has now moved to billet plantings using a 16in (400mm) wide planter chute.

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The Rainstar ES1 hard hose irrigator helped by Reef Rescue funding helps make the best use of our water and has been a real help in irrigating our plant and ratoon cane this season.

Les Durnsford, Mackay cane grower

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The family has been watching new innovations like minimum till and moved to 1.83 rows several years ago, but felt it was difficult to maintain the new ideas while still whole stick planting.

"I used to think I could plant a pretty straight row, but with much of our land undulating, it was often difficult to see the rows 'end to end' and they sometimes drifted offline, making it difficult to replant into the old stool with zero or minimum till.

"With the GPS system, which we purchased with help from Reef Rescue funding last year, we've noticed a huge difference, not in yield as yet

"We pulled our old billet planter out of the shed and extended the sides so we could load more billets into it and bought the disc opener from Hodge Industries, then did all the welding and fitting of the two pieces together ourselves.

"It all works pretty well now and with GPS on the tractor our planted rows are dead straight and of constant width. The harvester has been reconfigured so we can vary the length of the billets and it all worked pretty well this season."

Another purchase, helped by Reef Rescue funding, was a Rainstar E51 hard hose irrigator.



A wide chute disc opener built by Hodge Industries and connected to the old billet planter.



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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.

"Luckily the boys understand the computerisation of the system, but I'm pretty impressed by the degree of control of water flow the new computer gives us.

"Using the computer certainly helps us to make best use of our water and this season it has been a real help in irrigating our plant and ratoon cane," he said.

"All in all, we are pretty pleased with the help Reef Rescue has given us but we still have some way to go in the next few years to complete all the changes." ■



Les Durnsford checks the width of the stool in the new plantings of Q208.