

# Cane, bananas part of sustainable family business in Kennedy

David Singh with cane planted in raised beds on 1.8 m wide rows at Kennedy, south of Tully, FNQ. The Singh family is using best practice, assisted by Reef Rescue funding, to boost cane production from 36,000 t to 50,000 t by 2011. Right: The 3-row moulder used as part of their best practice farming system.

By Bill Kerr

Constant reminders of the symbiosis between agriculture and tourism in far north Queensland, gentle waves caress the sandy beaches at Cardwell, a short drive from the Singh family's dynamic farming enterprise in and around picturesque Kennedy Valley.

Here, on the edge of the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, sugarcane and banana industries rub shoulders with tourist attractions, underscoring the important role that farming best practice has in ensuring the Reef's continued good health.

Reef Rescue funding from the Federal Government's Caring for Our Country program is accelerating adoption of improved farming systems that will help ensure that sustainable crop production in this region remains a viable and valuable part of the scenery.

David Singh, a Director of CANEGROWERS Innisfail, understands the importance of using best practice management to maximise farm productivity and efficiency while minimising the impact on the community and environment, particularly the Reef.

As well as implementing a sustainable development program for the family's large and expanding cane operations, he is one of five growers in Pacific Coast Eco Bananas, a group committed

to producing quality bananas in a sustainable manner.

The distinctive red wax tips on their fruit are a sign that their production methods satisfy the high environmental standards inherent in ISO 14001. This includes using water wisely, minimising runoff, using energy efficiently, recycling and responsible disposal of waste, and monitoring soil and water health.

The Eco Bananas protocol requires nil use of nematicides and other insecticides in the soil and minimum use of fertiliser and farm chemicals generally. The growers assert that their 'ecoganic' farming systems ensure consistent production of better tasting fruit with a longer shelf life while enhancing the natural ecosystem in which they are grown.

Megadeen Pty Ltd is a family company comprising David, his parents and two brothers. His elder brother Bill, manages the company's electrical contracting business in Cairns. In addition to 53 ha of bananas, they have 634 ha of sugarcane including 110 ha leased recently.

This extra land, coupled with more productive farming methods, puts them on target to raise cane output from 36,000 tonnes to 50,000 t by 2011. Productivity and CCS awards hanging on the office wall attest to progress milestones.

The goal is to ensure future sustainability by reducing input costs and environmental impact using GPS guidance and mound



planting on a 1.8 m row system, growing soybeans as break crops, using fertiliser carefully and maintaining efficient farm layout including longer rows, sub-surface drainage and laser levelling.

They began converting to 1.8 m rows in 2005 and now have about 80% of cane area (508 ha) under wide rows.

David's father Sukhdev Singh came to Gordonvale in 1955. He cut cane for 15 years and worked at Mulgrave Mill but always wanted to be a farmer. The Singh family, originally from India's fertile Punjab region, has had a long association with farming. David's grandmother and CANEGROWERS Board member Rajinder Singh's grandfather were brother and sister.

David had his first glimpse of the Kennedy Valley as an apprentice with Ergon Energy. In 1985 he bought land previously used only for growing melons. At first, he was restricted to growing a few bananas because Tully Mill shunned new suppliers because of concerns over extending the crushing season. The Singhs got their chance to get

into cane when Bundaberg Sugar's Mourilyan Mill sought to replace cane land lost to bananas. A persuasive argument was its willingness to pay costs involved in transporting cane more than 80 km to the mill.

In 1994 the Singhs grew about 900 t near the Bruce Highway, before developing land in the Kennedy area the next year. They progressively acquired more land and now are among the mill area's largest growers.

This year's 134 ha planting will be followed by another 165 ha next year, including 50 ha not previously under cane. This has already been laser levelled and will be mound planted to soybeans along with the remainder sprayed out fallow through trash in preparation for cane next year.

David's sons Randeep (fitter and turner), Parmeet (engineering student) and Hardeep (scholar) are potential future cane growers who enjoy working on the farm whenever they can.

If they follow in Dad's footsteps their futures will be tied to Tully, not Innisfail. In 2011 most Kennedy/Murray cane (about 260,000 t) will transfer to Tully. Instead of being hauled in B Doubles to South Johnstone, the Singhs' cane will then be trucked about 10 km to Bilyana siding where it will go onto the mill line.

David describes the move as a straight forward business decision. He favours the new transport and other arrangements but admits he was surprised that Bundaberg Sugar did not fight harder to retain its suppliers.

He says he has always had confidence in sugarcane and was committed to a new production system even before sugar prices began their spectacular rise. By acting now he aims to be in a sound position when prices fall.



Reef Rescue funding helped FNQ grower David Singh acquire a purpose built Daybreak soybean planter, to work in trashy conditions.

He is a strong believer in forward planning (working up to three years ahead) and staying informed on industry developments. Experience in the highly competitive banana business has honed his attention to detail.

"I consider you need to do something properly or not at all. If you're going to be serious about cane in the future you have to adopt improved methods and you've got to do the work. Best practice doesn't just happen."

He soon learned that timing is crucial to farming his country successfully. Although it is not as wet as nearby Tully, heavy downpours can make the soil very boggy. Sometimes it takes two weeks before they can get back onto a block after heavy rain. Two years ago 400mm (16 inches) fell in 24 hours. Ironically, it can also be very dry at other times.



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*David Singh, Innisfail grower*

Good surface and subsurface drainage is essential to drain off water after high rainfall events or when the water table is high. Since 1996 he has installed around 20 km of underground drainage and replaced about half of the open drains.

Soil testing is conducted on all fallow blocks. Soybeans figure prominently in the Singhs' future farming strategy. David believes a long fallow regime based on soybeans can boost cane productivity. Although he had soybean failures the past two years due to wet weather, he intends to continue them as a break crop to improve soil health and add nitrogen to the soil. Long-term, he sees potential for growing non-edible soybeans in the northern winter to produce biodiesel.

Early experience indicates he might harvest grain every three years but there are benefits even if he has to plough in. This year he will fertilise soybeans for the first time.



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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.

Funding from the first round of Reef Rescue helped him buy a purpose-built Daybreak soybean planter able to work in trashy conditions. Coulter pressure can be adjusted from the tractor cab. The idea is to plant into soybean residues on the mounds using a conventional billet planter. Because of diverse soil types, he considers a disc opener planter would struggle in these conditions. A one-pass zonal tillage approach will be used on 90% of the farm.

Once he got the grant he fitted GPS to his tractors. Although reception is sometimes poor due to trees and creeks, precision farming represents a major step forward in tillage.

David applied for funding for a zonal tillage unit in the latest Reef Rescue grants. He is very thankful for the assistance provided by Debra Telford, the local extension officer. He endorses the scheme as a practical way of encouraging adoption of best practice.

"It certainly helps and what's good for productivity is good for the environment. We were going to buy some of this gear anyway but it would have taken us much, much longer." ■