

Cutting farm costs - better for the back pocket, and our backyard

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Fertiliser, chemical, fuel and power.

These four costs are combining to seriously compromise our local cane farmers.

In light of this, a group of growers are moving towards what they hope will be a more efficient future - one that helps the environment and our 'backyard' as much as their back pocket.

Through Reef Catchments and the Australian Government's Reef Trust program, 244 growers (farming 35,587 ha of cane) in Mackay, Sarina, Proserpine and the Whitsundays are taking steps toward change, particularly nutrient and herbicide management.

"The days of putting on too much fertiliser are long gone - it's very expensive if you don't get the tonnes per hectare," said Graeme Blackburn, a cane farmer based in Mirani who this year harvested 90,000 tonnes.

Graeme and his family are looking ahead to try and see where cost and environmental savings can be made.

"For me it's the future - we want to grow the cane as efficiently as we can and remain viable."

He said that meant making hectares work smarter. Thanks to co-funding from Reef Catchments via the Australian Government's Reef Trust 3 program, Graeme this year decided to match funds and purchase what is known as a bed renovator.

The renovator essentially can turn an old farm (with narrow rows) into a more modern controlled traffic based farm with wide rows.

"In a matter of two passes, Graeme can convert old ratoons and change 1.5m rows to 1.8m rows, for example ready for a soybean fallow," said Reef Catchments sustainable agriculture officer Ian Brooks.

Mr Brooks said a wider row and GPS controlled traffic farming system were "incredibly important" to improve production and water quality to the Reef across the state.

"This idea of row conversion is really getting traction. There are still a lot of narrow rows out there."

Graeme said they were already seeing some major benefits from the renovator since June this year.

"With this bit of equipment we can do up to 28 ha - 30 ha a day. Using the same amount of horsepower in a tractor, you'd only do half of that. So it's less fuel to the hectare and we're going twice as wide as what we'd do normally.

"It's tidy, it's all on GPS and it's all repeatable. So in five years, ten years time we'll know where that row will be."

Graeme said cane farming had undergone big changes over the years.

"I know that when it comes to fuel, twenty years ago I might have used up to 200,000 L for 40,000 tonnes of cane. Now, to produce 90,000 tonnes I'll use about half that around 100,000L - 120,00L. We're seeking efficiencies wherever we can."

But he said change took time.

"Our next big project will be a soybean fallow crop, put in on beds made by the renovator. What we're hoping is this will help soil nutrition, put more organic matter into the ground and it should lead in time to better crops.

"Once you've got a better crop, you've got more trash on the ground, you can equip yourself better for drought.

"And as you go on and on you find more benefits.

"I'm hoping we'll be able to get away with less chemical. My soil tests are saying we need a bit less nitrogen here or a bit less phosphorus here. We're still learning all this and it takes time. But for me, it is essential.

"Even before we purchased the renovator I started with a one-row system that was homemade. You can start from something in your backyard that you can modify."

Graeme is part of the wider Reef Trust program in Mackay and surrounds. The program saw farm extension officers work with hundreds of growers to improve nutrient and herbicide management.

Through Reef Trust 3, more than \$800,000 has been locally distributed to assist with equipment upgrades to fast-track practice change. Small grants (\$1500 p/grower) were additionally provided for spray equipment, soil tests, EM mapping and G-Dots.

Examples of equipment upgrades include:

- Spray rig upgrades and high-rise tractors that reduce the use of residual herbicide
- Variable rate fertiliser controllers that target the actual yield on individual cane blocks e.g. late harvest and late ratoons

Interested growers can take a look at case studies on www.reefcatchments.com

ENDS

This program is funded by the Australian Government and landholders, and delivered in partnership with the Reef Trust.

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http://reefcatchments.com.au/files/2018/12/2-Three-row-Hodge-controlled-traffic-bed-renovator-DSC_0028.jpg



Graeme Blackburn, cane farmer, Mirani



Three-row Hodge controlled traffic bed renovator