

# Reef Awards celebrate growers water quality improvement efforts

By Angela Linhart

CANEGROWERS members and others in the industry have been recognised at the 2019 Reef Champion Awards celebrating efforts to improve water quality for the Great Barrier Reef.

Innovative nitrogen reduction practices, dedicated approaches to extension, revegetation of farms and conservation of wetlands and native animal species were just some of the success stories honoured at this year's Awards dinner in Mackay.

CANEGROWERS Cairns Region member Lenny Parisi took out the esteemed Prince of Wales Environmental Leadership - Reef Sustainability Award for converting seven hectares of cane land to a wetland environment.

The Parisi family has farmed sugarcane on their property in the Wet Tropics region of far north Queensland for three generations. Much of their farmland adjoins areas of significant environmental

value, with the creeks running through their property flowing into the Mulgrave River and on to the Great Barrier Reef Lagoon.

The project at Fig Tree Lagoon is part of Greening Australia's Priority Coastal Habitat and Wetlands Project, funded through the Australian Government's Reef Trust Program, and is in partnership with the Mulgrave Landcare and Catchment Group.

"When it rains here we can get up to 30 centimetres of rain in one night, so we built this sediment pond (pictured below) to filter sediment and feed the lagoons," Lenny said when *Australian Canegrower* visited the Parisi family farm at Fishery Falls, just south of Cairns.

Three years on and the revegetation project has seen 14,000 trees planted along 6 km of waterways on his land and 7,000 trees are being planted as part of the constructed wetland, helping to slow the water flow during downpours and increasing water penetration into the soil.

In a testament to the wetland environment that has been created, a rare bird has recently started frequenting the area.

"In the 40 years I've lived here I've never seen a Glossy Ibis. A local ornithologist confirmed 'It is a Glossy Ibis, they love swampy country and obviously they like your lagoon,'" Lenny said.

Lenny's passion for the area is clear. He is eager to do his bit for the environment



The winners of the 2019 Reef Champion Awards.

**"As time goes on there should be environmental changes for everybody. I think everyone's gotta look after the land a bit more. It's a duty of care to leave it to my grandkids better than how I found it."**

*Pictured: (right) Lenny Parisi being presented with The Prince of Wales Environmental Leadership - Reef Sustainability Award at the Awards dinner, (below left) Lenny amongst the revegetated land that had previously been vacant for over ten years, (below middle) the constructed wetland that is also home to a four metre crocodile, (below right) Lenny with his award on the Parisi farm.*

in the place that he calls home. He is also part of SRA's Cane to Creek Project and MSF Sugar's Project Uplift.

"Every day you learn something new. Farming's like that," he said.

"I like to look outside the square. As time goes on there should be environmental changes for everybody. I think everyone's gotta look after the land a bit more. It's a duty of care to leave it to my grandkids better than how I found it."

Other sustainability initiatives include reducing fertiliser application rates, cutting green and trash blanketing, and planting fallow crops.

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Lenny was also recently awarded The Chris Jones Environmental Stewardship Award by Greening Australia.

"Lenny has been such an inspiration to partner with as part of Greening Australia's Reef Aid Program, always a willing spokesperson and together we have been able to achieve amazing results," said Dr Lynise Wearne, Program Director - Reef Aid, Greening Australia.

You wouldn't guess that just 12 months ago Lenny was battling cancer. He underwent intensive chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant.

"It put a halt on a bit of my work for 12 months. I'm just lucky it's a family partnership, I've got two brothers and my nephew, and we all work together," he said. "We don't make a real lot of money, but we have a lot of fun along the way."

CANEGROWERS Innisfail Chairman Joe Marano was also a finalist for this year's Prince of Wales Award.

A third-generation sugarcane grower at Mourilyan, he and his family farm 417 hectares and have been implementing best management practices since the late 1970s.

Joe's family farming business is Smartcane BMP accredited and he has been an active participant in numerous Reef incentive programs to change practices for improved water quality.

This includes improved soil health and nitrogen use efficiency, reduced sediment losses and improved chemical application.

Joe contributes to the industry through a range of leadership positions. In addition to being Chairman of CANEGROWERS Innisfail, he is member of the CANEGROWERS Queensland Policy Council and Board.

He is also a grower representative in Project Cane Changer, has a trial site on his property as part of the EEF 60 Project, is Chairman of The Wet Tropics Sugar Industry Partnership (WTSIP) and the Wet Tropics Major Integrated Project Steering Committee.

"We don't do it for the accolades or the awards. I'd like to congratulate all the award winners for their hard work," he said.

The Rossi family at Aloomba were joint winners of the Reef Nutrient Champion Award - recognised for embracing organic methods of boosting their soil profile and providing nutrient to the crop the way that nature intended.

They use recycled waste materials to create compost, conditioning the soil and supplying their cane with an abundance of organic nutrients. This reduces their need for inorganic nitrogen fertiliser and the risk of nutrient leaving the farm and entering waterways.

In 2017 the Rossi family received funding through the Reef Trust IV Grant to purchase machinery to set up the composting system.

The machines include a feedlot mixer that blends organic ingredients before dispersing them into windrows.

The recycled waste products used depend on what is available and can include biosolids, cane trash, mill mud, bagasse, council green mulch and excess mixed species fallow crops.

The compost turner plays an essential role in the brewing process.



"It aerates and adds oxygen into it. We do it initially once or twice when we first make it then we do it every one to two weeks," Mark Rossi explained. "This speeds up the composting process.

"By research, we've found that if we can keep the heaps between 55-65 degrees celcius for a period of 15 to 20 days that kills all the pathogens and seeds and anything else that you can get in your green waste."

Since implementing the composting system, they have reduced nitrogen application by 30%. These practices, including multi-species fallow cropping, have vastly improved the overall soil healthy and biology.

Green harvesting and trash blanketing, subsurface fertiliser application and improved pesticide regimes have also enhanced operations.

In addition, a silt trap and the revegetation of their creek boundary drain with river cherry have maintained biodiversity and improved water quality.

"We've grown up in this beautiful Mulgrave valley here, loved all the natural surrounds and the river," Tony Rossi said.

"We just see it as part of our core business that we want to be productive cane farmers but we want to do the right thing by the environment too.

"As a family we would like to thank QFF, CANEGROWERS and the Reef Alliance for recognition of our operations.

"We are on a steep learning curve but feel we are on the right track to improve soil health, productivity, profitability and enhanced environmental outcomes."

Full finalists details can be found on the Queensland Farmers' Federation website: [www.qff.org.au/projects/reef-alliance/2019-reef-champion-awards/](http://www.qff.org.au/projects/reef-alliance/2019-reef-champion-awards/) ■

*Pictured: (opposite) L-R: Joseph Marano, Prince of Wales Environmental Leadership - Reef Sustainability Award Finalist, William Darveniza, Reef Youth Champion Award Winner, Lenny Parisi, Prince of Wales Environmental Leadership - Reef Sustainability Award Winner, Jayson Dowie, Reef Extension Officer Champion Award Joint Winner, Tony Rossi, Reef Nutrient Champion Award Joint Winner. (Above) three generations of the Rossi family. L-R back: Mark Rossi, Tony Rossi, Peter Rossi, Stephen Rossi, Chris Rossi, L-R front: Andrew Rossi, Rick Rossi. (Below) a compost turner aerating windrows on the Rossi farm.*

