

TIME OFF-FARM

OFFERS FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON PRACTICE CHANGE, REGULATIONS AND THE INDUSTRY'S FUTURE

By Wayne Griffin

Ever since Michael Santarossa returned to take over the family farm in Mulgrave five years ago, he and his dad Alan have had differences of opinion on what it takes to grow cane. Farming systems, practice change, row spacings and even inputs have all been hot topics for debate. But on one topic the father-son team is united — the State Government's proposed expansion to the reef regulations are a step too far.

For 20 years Michael worked in the mining industry, not just in Australia but around the world. It taught him many things like there's always room to improve, to be more efficient, to look at problems from a different perspective, and even the importance of paperwork.

It also taught him something about regulations — every industry has them.

"I believe there has to be some sort of environmental regulation because every other industry has them," Michael said when *Australian Canegrower* visited the family farm recently.



"We can't expect to be the only industry with no regulations, but I've got a real issue with this lot of legislation that they're trying to pass now, because I think it really becomes a privacy issue.

"I'm fine with being audited. They can come in and check that I'm doing the right thing. What I'm not ok with is with my intellectual property being demanded from my resellers and by a roundabout method some official being able to find out my entire farming method. I don't agree with that, I think it's way out of line.

"Also, to be honest, I don't really trust the government to keep my records private. Every second week the government or something is being hacked, so that's another issue. They haven't got a great track record on data security."

Unlike many of his peers, Alan (Michael's father) also agrees that some level of environmental regulation is a necessary evil, but he too thinks the government is looking for a scapegoat rather than seeking to address the problem properly.





"We've all got a part to play in water quality, but I definitely don't think we're wholly and solely the big, bad boogeymen that we're portrayed to be by the government."

Pictured: After 20 years in the mining industry, Michael Santarossa decided to return to his roots, taking over the family's Mulgrave cane farm from his dad, Alan, in 2014.

"At the end of the day, you can't get accountability without legislation and, as Michael says, we've no problem with auditing but this new legislation is too far," Alan said.

"Wrights Creek, which runs around all these farms, it starts way up on the Tableland, it drains half the township of Edmonton, but we're on the end down here so we must be doing the damage. No, there's a lot of sediment and nutrients in that water before it hits here.

"Look we've all got a part to play in water quality, but I definitely don't think we're wholly and solely the big, bad boogeymen that we're portrayed to be by the government," Michael added.

While the pair agree on reef regs, when it comes to other farming-related topics they haven't always seen eye-to-eye.

Alan (72), has lived and worked his entire life on the family farm bought by his father in 1944. Cane farming has been his life's work and, until recently, he had some very set ideas about how it should be done.

Michael (39), a diesel fitter by trade, left the farm at 17 to work in the mining industry. He travelled the world, working his way up the ranks in the gold, zinc, copper and chromium mines of Africa, Kazakhstan and Indonesia, before returning home in 2014.

"I was sick of working overseas, to be honest," Michael said. "I was a bit burnt out after years working away, so I came back and the company I was with offered me a different role in Australia.

"I decided to lease Dad's farm off him. It's only a smallish farm, so I could manage it in my weeks off. And then the guy next door decided he wanted to retire, so he leased me his place. Then another neighbour decided he wanted to retire as well, so I leased his place as well."

Now farming 146 hectares of cane land, Michael had to choose between farming full-time and his mining role. It wasn't a difficult decision – in 2016 he called time on his mining career and settled into a life of cane farming.

Initially Alan was a font of farming knowledge for his inexperienced son.

Continues page 14 ►



"I think the industry has a lot of potential for the future. But it will require a few changes in attitude and a period of adjustment."

However, as Michael found his feet, Alan became increasingly skeptical of some of the new practices being adopted on-farm, such as Michael's decision to move from a 1.6 to 1.8 metre row system.

"There was complete agreement for a little while – basically both of us thought it was dumb," Michael said.

"Then there was disagreement, where I was leaning towards it but Dad wasn't. And that's probably my fault a bit. Because I come from a mining background and he comes from a farming background, I think I wasn't communicating my ideas very well. It was getting a bit lost in translation.

"Then recently we went and visited (CANEGROWERS Cairns Region Chairman) Steve Calcagno down on his farm. He has a similar set-up to what I want here, and when Dad could actually see what I was talking about firsthand, it was like 'oh, that's way different to what I was envisaging when you were explaining it to me.' Then it started making a lot of sense to him."

Alan, now a convert to the 1.8m row system, is yet to be completely sold on Michael's other big change – targeted nutrient management plans.

"Probably the biggest change I've made is introducing nutrient management plans and laser levelling of blocks," Michael said.

"I do a lot of soil tests to make sure I'm getting my inputs right. I probably do them a bit more other than other people because I want to get the optimum uptake of nutrients.

"I then vary the rate of application depending on what the soil sample says, which is why Dad tears his hair out, I reckon. I think we had five different mixes of fertiliser last year."

"A load of you know what," Alan joked. "A bucket of something in this one and two teaspoons of something else in that one. Can't you just get a blend that'll pass the test?"

"No, I'm not fully converted yet, but I'm getting better."

However, even Alan has to admit the results to date have been impressive.

"Last year we averaged 91 tonnes to the hectare, which was actually a lot higher than the district average," Michael said.

"The average CCS in the mill region was 14.5, which was great because I think it's usually around 12.5, so it was a really good year for sugar. But I was getting a half a unit more than that, so I was really happy. I put a lot of it down to the nutrient management plan.

"I went away to a lot of seminars, because I was starting from scratch. Noel Wright and Michael Porter from MSF were kind enough to take me away for a few seminars. Then CANEGROWERS had a couple of agronomists come up and we were able to pick their brains. The guys in the mill were really good too.

"I base my nutrient plan off a standard soil test. But I think a big difference is, that after doing these seminars and talking to all these experts, I can actually read the test results properly now.

"You'd be amazed at how many people can't read a soil test properly. They look at the first five lines, do I need lime or don't I, but there's a lot of other information and they have no idea what it means.

"And to be honest, there's still some people who have never had a soil test done. I know an old guy who's been farming cane all his life and he got his first ever soil test last year."

Michael is currently working towards Smartcane BMP accreditation and hopes to have completed all three core modules in the next few months.

He hasn't found the process too challenging - something he puts down to his mining background.

"I think it does help when you come from somewhere else, from another industry. Because you know nothing, you try to get as much information as possible and absorb everything. You're open to all ideas and you haven't got any preconceived notions.

"I'm working my way through BMP at the moment. I've completed most of the core modules. I've got my records done, my fertiliser application rates, my spray regime, that's all sorted, but I still have to get my chemical storage solution in place."

Record-keeping is regularly raised as the most challenging aspect of the program for growers. However, after 20 years in mining, keeping accurate records is second nature to Michael.

"That aspect of it didn't really worry me and that's probably just from my background. In the mining industry you have to record everything," he said.

"It's funny, I spoke to the girls from the Cane Changer project recently. They'd just run a record-keeping course for the wives of growers and apparently all these women came away from the course saying, 'What are they (their husbands) whinging about, it's not even that hard'.

"In fairness, the average age in the district is over 60. There's only a handful under 40 and even those are usually driving harvesters or whatever, and not really involved in the day to day farming, so I suppose those demographics make the record-keeping aspect more challenging, especially when it comes to using technology," Michael admitted.

Despite his concern over the impending reef regulations and the current low world sugar price, Michael is optimistic about his future in cane farming.

"I think the industry has a lot of potential for the future. But it will require a few changes in attitude and a period of adjustment, like every other industry in the world has had to go through or is going through at the minute.

"And we need that willingness to go along with it. But definitely, I think there's a bright future.

"You know, being from another industry, I wouldn't have dropped everything to get into this if I thought it was going to go belly up in five or 10 years' time."

As for Alan, despite his skepticism about some of the newer farming practices, he's happy to take a back seat and let his son get on with it.

"There is a generational change coming and I think for my generation, we can't be obstructionist, because we've had our go," Alan said.

"It's been good too, we've enjoyed it. Now it's time to let the younger ones have their go." ■

Money Matters

with Sunsuper

SUNSUPER REDUCES FEES AND COSTS FOR MEMBERS

Members of Sunsuper can now benefit from reduced fees and costs following changes introduced 1 July 2019. Sunsuper has reduced its weekly fee from \$3.00 to \$1.50 for pension members and reduced the investment fee and costs for its pension account default investment option from 0.80% to 0.73%.

For more than 1.3 million Super-savings members, Sunsuper has reduced the investment fee and costs for its default investment option from 0.85% to 0.79%.

Sunsuper's Chief Financial Officer Jason Sommer said the Fund is also maintaining its insurance premiums at a time when a number of other funds have had to increase insurance premiums in response to the Protecting Your Super legislation.

"These changes further strengthen Sunsuper's position as one of the lowest cost superannuation funds in Australia," Mr Sommer said.

"As a profit-for-members fund, our strong growth and increasing scale means we can pass on savings to members," Mr Sommer said.

"Passing on a reduction in fees and costs is consistent with our duty to act in our members' best interests and halving the weekly administration fee for our pension members and reducing investment fees and costs is a great outcome".

For more information on how to join Sunsuper, visit www.sunsuper.com.au/choose

Disclaimer: This article has been prepared and issued by Sunsuper Pty Ltd, the trustee and issuer of the Sunsuper Superannuation Fund. Sunsuper Pty Ltd ABN 88 010 720 840, AFSL No. 228975, is the Trustee and issuer of the Sunsuper Superannuation Fund ABN 98 503 137 921, USI 98 503 137 921 001.

 sunsuper