

SWITCHING TO WIDER ROWS BOOSTS EFFICIENCY AND SOIL HEALTH FOR WET TROPICS GROWERS

Supplied by WTSIP

When Babinda cane grower Steven Bonso saw how soft the soil was on a Bundaberg farm during a field trip several years ago, he knew it was time to make some changes at home.

"The penetrometer being used to measure soil compaction levels literally fell into the soil," Steven said of the Bundaberg farm.

"The farmer had been using wider 1.8m rows, zonal tillage and cover crops for nearly 20 years. It was a turning point for me."

The third-generation cane farmer began trialling 1.8m rows and last year, with the

help of an Australian Government Reef Trust III grant through the Wet Tropics Sugar Industry Partnership (WTSIP), he started to transition the whole farm. This year he planted using the wider rows across all farms.

The family now uses a controlled traffic system with GPS autosteer on tractors, and will use a multi-species fallow crop this season for more soil health benefits.



These changes follow several years of mill ash application and reducing bagged nitrogen from 160kg per hectare to 140kg for ratoons and 125kg for plants.

Steven said he and his father Leo did their homework first.

"We had a strip trial in a paddock for five years and there was no loss in yield between our 1.6m and 1.8m sections," he said.

"I had a look around at other farms, and went to WTSIP and Terrain NRM workshops with soil ecologist David Hardwick and the Regenerative Cane Farming Forum in Ingham.

"You could see the savings with less trips up and down the paddock and less costs for harvesting.

"Then there's the benefits for soil health with less compaction and, in time, the potential for higher yields."

The Reef Trust grant helped the Bonsos to install GPS guidance on their tractor and widen it, as well as their two-row planter and spray boom.

In the Ingham region, Allan Lynn has found that sharing machinery with





Pictured: Babinda cane growers Steven and Leo Bonso and (right) Ingham grower Allan Lynn.

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neighbouring growers and moving to 1.8m rows together made the transition easier.

The fourth-generation cane farmer began his changeover a decade ago with the help of an Australian Government Reef Rescue grant.

"It was more about improving soil health," he said. "In the same period my fertiliser regime has dropped at least 50kg of nitrogen per hectare. The highest level now is 120kg and my yield hasn't suffered.

"Going to 1.8m rows can be the start of a bigger change including multi-species cropping. I'm going back into my old beds now and the drill area is as soft as butter, and the root systems are at least a third to double the size of plants across the headlands."

WTSIP regional support extension officer **Michael Waring** said more growers were being encouraged to consider moving to controlled traffic with 1.8m rows.

"Growers who've made the switch are experiencing greater efficiencies and cost savings as a result of spending less time in the field.

"On a 100-hectare property you'll save about 69km in harvester travel a season with wider rows, plus there's less wear and tear and less stool damage by the machinery.

"So even though it's financially challenging to make such a big change there are definite business advantages to be gained and this is encouraging others to consider moving to wider rows," he said.

SMARTCANE BMP ACCREDITATION

As well as boosting efficiency and improving soil health, Steven Bonso's on-farm adaptations have played an important role in him achieving accreditation in the industry's best management practice program, Smartcane BMP.

Alongside dad Leo, he was presented with his accreditation certificate by Cairns Region Smartcane BMP facilitator, **Joel Tierney**, during a grower gathering at Fishery Falls recently.

Fellow Cairns Region grower **Tilly Spertino** also received his accreditation certificate at the event.

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"We want to recognise the efforts of Leo, Steven and Tilly who have been working hard to make their way through the Smartcane BMP program over the past year," Joel said.

"We've seen a lot of interest in the program recently with the majority of growers in the Cairns Region engaged in it."

The Fishery Falls get-together was hosted by the CANEGROWERS Project Cane Changer to celebrate the achievements of growers in the region.

On the night, Cane Changer project leader Dr John Pickering thanked growers for their on-going commitment.

Cairns Region was one of the first cane districts to embrace the project when it was launched in 2016. Since then, more than 70 growers have jumped on board.

"We'd like to sincerely thank all of the growers for helping to set the record straight over the past two years and for all of the work which has been done in the decades before this project began," Dr Pickering said.

At the event, growers were presented with a Cane Changer Declaration

highlighting the practices they have changed over the years to improve productivity and protect the environment.

"A lot can certainly change over the years, and that's no different for Cairns growers," Dr Pickering said. "In fact, these declarations show that across Cairns, growers involved in the project have changed well over 500 practices in the past decade."

"The majority of growers involved in the project are using fallow crops, sub-surface fertiliser application and have made large-scale changes to their farm layout and drainage systems," he said. "We're also seeing newer practices like the use of GPS and laser levelling increasing in popularity."

"There is a lot of great work happening in the Cairns Region at the moment," said CANEGROWERS Cairns Region Manager Sarah Standen. "Cairns growers have a long history of change and innovation.

"Programs like Cane Changer are just one of the many ways our district is working towards better outcomes for growers and the industry while demonstrating our environmental credentials." ■

Pictured: Cairns Region Smartcane BMP facilitator Joel Tierney presenting Babinda grower Steven Bonso with his Smartcane BMP accreditation certificate.

To find out more about Project Cane Changer visit www.canechanger.com

To find out more about Smartcane BMP visit www.smartcane.com.au

To find out more about WTSIP visit www.wtsip.org.au

The Reef Trust III Water Quality Grants program aims to reduce nitrogen use and improve water quality in cane-growing districts bordering the Great Barrier Reef while also boosting on-farm profitability and efficiencies.

