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## Chasing efficiency and productivity at Bundaberg

*Bundaberg farmers Mark and Brian Pressler are hopeful of obtaining about a five-year pay-off period for an investment in new irrigation infrastructure, and so far the results have been encouraging.*

*By Brad Pfeiffer*

The investment in a lateral move irrigator has boosted production and slashed costs for Bundaberg growers Mark and Brian Pressler.

The brothers farm about 105 hectares in the Millaquin mill area and are now entering their third year of operation for the lateral, which irrigates about 47 hectares and has a span of 216 metres (covering 230 metres with end guns).

They estimate that the \$200,000 investment should pay for itself in about five years.

Yields under the lateral in 2015 averaged about 120 tonne/ha, which included a large area of older ratoons, as well as some plant cane. This included about 11 hectares of fourth ratoon cane that yielded 130 tonne/ha, although the brothers made a hard decision to plough out this high-performing cane to make way for new varieties.

This compares to other parts of their farming area which are mainly under water winch, and yielded in the range of 100-110 tonne/ha in 2015.

"There are also large savings with power and manpower, as well as water use efficiency," Brian Pressler said. The efficiency of the lateral has been estimated to save around two thirds of water application costs.

Despite some good rain and growing periods over the summer, the irrigation equipment has also had a big job ahead of it in 2016. The lateral has had no problem in keeping up.

They are able to cover the entire 47 hectares in six days, which was a job that required up to two weeks with winches, and could see the crop moisture stress and production suffering as a result.

When *CaneConnection* visited in mid-April, it had been a mixed season to date, with some good falls of rain and hot and humid weather spurring strong growth, but with some long dry spells as well. All up, Brian is expecting the 2016 season to be fairly similar to the reasonable result that they had in 2015.

The positive results that the Presslers are achieving are about more than just the lateral, and are a combination of a number of factors where they play close attention to the finer details.

Most of the farms are red volcanic soils that the region is known for, while they also look after these soils with rotational crops at the end of the crop cycle.

They have successfully grown soybeans in the past, but access to a contract harvester has made this prospect difficult. This has seen them focus on fallow crops such as cowpeas or Dolichos Lablab.



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"We are hoping to get five ratoons out of our crop, and are having some good results. One block is fourth ratoon this year and is looking as healthy as plant cane," Brian said.

A contributing factor is that they harvest their own cane (as well as contracting) and an adherence to harvest best practice principles.

"We try to follow the work that the researchers have done and put that into practice. We know going too fast and having high extraneous matter affects the CCS, and also cutting the billets small may make it seem easier to keep the cane cleaner, but there's also a fair bit fly out before they make it to the bin.

"There's a better chance of hanging onto those billets by cutting them longer. We also know that it is a fine line with speed and getting the job done, and all you can do is your best."

Their harvesting schedule with the mill is one week on, one week off. They aim to cut their 40-50 bins per day hopefully by around lunch time, which allows them the afternoons and the off weeks to continue the farm work, as well as work contract planting.

Their main varieties are Q228<sup>®</sup> for early sugar and then Q240<sup>®</sup> for later sugar. In their harder black soil and gravel country, Brian said that Q242<sup>®</sup> appeared to be doing well in those conditions.

"We always try the new varieties when they come out, and know that sometimes they are not going to suit us and our conditions," he said.

"We look at the CCS and tonnes, but we also look at disease ratings, as although we don't have major concerns, we want to keep it that way and know that there are places in the district where Pachymetra has been a problem."

In 2015, the Presslers won the Reef Program Sugarcane Award, an award that recognises positive practice change that delivers positive outcomes for farm productivity and the environment.

#### Photos:

1. Brian Pressler says 2016 is looking to be a reasonable season.
2. The Presslers manufacture some of their own equipment, including this narrow tractor equipped for weed spraying. Brian concedes that operating it isn't the most enjoyable job on the farm, but says it is very effective in getting the job done efficiently.
3. Brian with some of the older irrigation equipment.
4. Checking out the crop and hoping for a similar or better result to last year.