



NSW farmer Danny Lickiss is introducing a number of practice changes at his Broadwater property.

## From swinging a hammer to cutting cane

*Young farmer Danny Lickiss is introducing changes such as a soybean rotation and wider rows to the farming system. By Brad Pfeffer*

Even though New South Wales farmer Danny Lickiss is a fifth generation sugarcane grower, he wasn't always sure whether he would end up growing cane.

A builder by trade, it was only in 2006 when he broke his arm playing football that led Danny to the final decision to become a full-time farmer at the family property between Broadwater and Woodburn.

As one of four siblings, and the only son in the family, he said there was always an expectation that he would become a farmer, along with hard work growing up on the property.

"I completed my trade and did at least 10 hours per week on the farm, which was a lot of work at the time," Danny said.

"Then, when I broke my arm, I was off work building for a few months, so I ended up on the farm every day and fell in love with it again.

"I enjoy the challenge, not just in providing for my family, but also contributing to the community through activities such as surf life saving."

Returning to be a full time farmer, he said it was important that he approached things in his own way.

He bought the 100 hectare property from his father, but he also knew that to be able to support a family and a mortgage he would need to expand beyond that.

Thus he is share-farming a significant area to the south near Woodburn and hopes that production most years should be in the range of 12-17,000 tonne.

Most of the crops are grown as two-year old, as is usual on the Richmond and Clarence Rivers.

In 2016, he was close to his target average of 145 tonnes per hectare and was also above the mill on sugar.

"You always have your better paddocks and your bad paddocks, but that is where I would like to be."

He is already making changes to the farming system. The improvement in chemicals over the last 10 years ago for weeds and pests means that there is much less working of the soil preparing the bed for the next cane crop.

"Each year I'm planting 35-45 hectares of cane per year plus soybeans, so there is not the time to be scuffling the ground every few weeks."

He has also introduced soybeans at the end of the crop cycle. "Some of the blocks had grown cane for 100 years, which is great that the ground was able to do that, but at the same time it is like everything and has benefited from a spell."

He is also looking to minimise the cost of machinery, and for example has bought a soybean planter in partnership with another farmer.

"It is an expensive piece of gear to have sit in the shed for 11 months of the year, and to get the best out of it you want it ready to go when you want.

"The soil here grows good crops, but there is only a small window when conditions are right for planting, which means we don't want to be relying on contractors."

After harvest this year, he will be widening row widths and moving to adopt a controlled-traffic farming system.

Rows will go from 1580mm out to 1800mm, and he is still deciding whether this will be dual or single rows of cane.

"Some of the share-farm country is on 1800mm and the speed at which I can get across that ground is phenomenal.

"We've used a lot of lime and chicken manure over the years, and I hope that in the future we will be able to get more benefit out of these by putting them out in sections rather than a broadcast application.

"I'm not trying to grow more tonnes, but am hoping that the soil health will improve."

His main variety is Q208<sup>®</sup>, which he said was performing well with good sugar, average tonnes, and good ratoons. He said Q240<sup>®</sup> and Q232<sup>®</sup> were also going well, and this year these three varieties will be most of his crop.

He had previously grown more of the Broadwater variety 1394, he has some Q183<sup>®</sup>, and he has also tried Q242<sup>®</sup> and Q254<sup>®</sup>.

He said that it had been a good season for NSW in 2016 and there were hopes that this would continue this year and 2018, with the dry conditions during most of the harvest putting the ratoons in good shape for the 2018 harvest.

"It was the most tonnes that I'd ever cut, and of the four harvesting rounds, the last three were dry. Between the three mills we harvested just over two million tonnes, which is an excellent result."

At Broadwater, while some land is being lost to macadamia production and lifestyle change close to Ballina, there has also been expansion of the area toward Casino.

"The frost risk increases as you head west, and it is a high risk there, but so far the farmers there have been okay, which has helped get them on their feet, which has been a positive for the mill area."

