



Melissa and Andrew Deguara, Pinevale, run a diversified farming business growing about 30,000 tonne.

Focussing on tonnes to drive profitability

Andrew and Melissa Deguara are running a diversified farming business with attention to detail on productivity drivers for their enterprise. By Brad Pfeffer

Running a diversified farming business that includes sugarcane farming and harvesting, Andrew and Melissa Deguara have approached both the farming and harvesting from the same angle – and that is to ensure the highest returns via a high-yielding crop.

The Deguaras cut about 60,000 tonne at Pinevale west of Mackay, about half of which is their own cane.

With this approach, it is no surprise that they are adopting a wide range of practices that are geared toward maximising productivity and profitability for their business, which consists of cane, soybean, cattle, and the contract harvesting.

This includes a strong focus on irrigation, a soybean fallow crop, improving soil health, and optimising harvest efficiency.

The soybean are considered to be such a priority for the business and improving soil health that this became an important factor in scheduling harvesting as the 2016 season neared its end, to ensure that they could plant their full soybean crop, which is usually 50 to 60 hectares.

“Our fallow is our most important tool for improving soil health, which we had to prioritise in 2016 with the late finish,” Andrew explained.

As with all farmers in the region, with time running out in December and the wet weather setting in, they had to make some hard choices about which blocks to stand over.

They ended up with about 2000 tonnes of standover, which they said “could have been a lot worse” based on the outlook mid-season.

“In early to mid-December it went from dead dry to wet and we were caught out in places with blocks that we could not get back to,” Andrew said.

“But we made the best decisions we could at the time and also had to change our mind a few times as the weeks progressed. We left varieties like Q240[Ⓟ] and Q208[Ⓟ], as well as some Q183[Ⓟ].”

They focussed on cutting varieties such as Q232[Ⓟ] and Q228[Ⓟ]. “There are places also where, in hindsight, we should have stood some over, in places where the ratoons won’t be ploughed out this year. They did receive a bit of damage in the wet weather,” they said.

“We didn’t get things exactly right, but in saying that we did plant all our soybean, which is what we were aiming for.”

The Deguaras are also keen to optimise harvest efficiency and have already taken a number of steps. They operate on 1.86m rows and their harvester is equipped with GPS and with EHS chopper drums, which they say has made a big difference.

"There is still room for improvement. We try and keep everything sharp – twice a day – and have our extractor fan speeds down, which we can only do by having everything sharp. We want the ground speed down, and we do that through the tonnes from the irrigation.

"From the farm point of view, things like block layout, weed control, and rocks are all issues to consider. Just a simple thing like picking rocks is something that we feel really cuts down your losses.

"About 70 percent of our contract is under GPS, which is another improvement."

They also have irrigation via seven centre pivots, soft hoses and flood irrigation. As part of that, they recently attended a workshop as part of the Smartcane BMP

program on irrigation efficiency, where Steve Attard from AgriTech Solutions was the presenter.

"We have the infrastructure for irrigation, but we also feel we can fine tune things to get the water on as cheaply and as efficiently as we can," Andrew said.

"That will involve decisions around scheduling, investing in new technology, and ensuring we are on the right tariff.

"At the end of the day, I really don't like cutting poor cane in the harvester, which is half the reason I like irrigating."

All of these improvements are now assisting them to attempt Bonsucro accreditation, aided by their agronomy consultant Farmacist. The Deguaras first became aware of Bonsucro four years ago at a conference run by the Australian Cane Farmers' Association (ACFA).

Melissa said that the accreditation was mostly about formally recognising a number of practices that were already in place at the farm, although it had identified a few things that they are

now working on such as ensuring staff received more training, and changing some chemical usage.

"Anything you do, whether it be BMP or Bonsucro, it is helpful in getting you thinking about things you can implement to improve your business," Melissa said. "We find the same thing with cattle industry forums for that side of our business."

Following Cyclone Debbie, which tore through about three weeks after **CaneConnection** visited the Deguaras, they said that there had been significant crop and stock losses, which would flow through to this year's season and a recovery process that will take several years. The recent cyclone event has changed their decision on plant variety selection, mainly due to SP80 having suffered the most damage.

For more information

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Below: The 2017 soybean crop pictured in March.

