



Diversification and innovation help ride the industry ups and downs

The Puglisi family at Mossman have plenty of irons in the fire with their diversified business, but at the heart of their operation is ensuring their business is productive and profitable. By Brad Pfeffer

The shift from a rotary hoe to a wavy disc cultivator is hoped to deliver soil health benefits and reduce costs for the Puglisi family in Far North Queensland.

Farming 188 hectares north side of Mossman, Angelo and Gerard Puglisi bought the new cultivator in 2016 from Hudson Engineering in the Burdekin.

They had already been working in recent years to move to zonal tillage with a rotary hoe, as well as to introduce other farm improvements such as GPS guidance and fallow legume crops such as cowpeas or soybean (green manure).

Gerard said that the wavy disc was another step toward less cultivation, which he hoped would continue to improve soil health over the long-term, and also reduce farm costs.

"It will mean fewer passes and less fuel, as we know that we need to keep getting our costs down in order to handle the ups and downs of the industry," he said.

While the rotary hoe was a high-wear implement that had to be run with high revs, the wavy disc machine is much lower impact and costs less to run. Gerard has made some refinements by adding weight to ensure it penetrates to the right depth and he is working toward it being a one-pass machine to form his beds.

In the future, he may also look to use it to incorporate liquid fertiliser.

He chose a one-row implement due to width restraints from a local bridge that would have meant a three-row implement would have been too wide.

Nonetheless, at a travel speed of 10-11km per hour, he said this was amply sufficient for getting plenty of work done.

Innovations – whether big or small – are familiar to Gerard, as he also has a role with NextGen that sees him travel across the industry.

"Farmers are incredible innovators, and that is one of the great things about NextGen," he said. "It brings people together from different regions to talk about different ideas and how to put them to practice.

"The cane harvester is a good example. They all come off the factory floor the same, but I've never seen two cane harvesters that are set up the same once you get them inside the farm gate.

“Everyone is looking over the headland to see what their neighbours are doing.”

Gerard is also always on the lookout for innovations to improve productivity and efficiency.

With a number of other ventures occupying the family, time is a precious commodity for the Puglisis.

As well as the cane, they also have 2ha of cocoa, a farm tour business called Sweet Farm Tours, an on-farm shop to accompany the tours, and a newly planted area of eucalypt trees to grow koala food.

The cocoa production consumes the time of four people for about four hours every two weeks, from April right through to the end of the year. This work has to be balanced with the main activity of the sugarcane season.

The 1.4ha of koala food (eucalyptus) has been planted in partnership with Hartley’s Crocodile Adventures, to ensure food for the koalas that they also have there. This area of the farm, along with the cocoa, was a way of getting an income from flood-prone blocks that were not high performers with sugarcane.

An example of another innovation that the Puglisis are looking at is skip-row fallowing, where the fallowing of a block is spread over two years.

This has already been investigated by some in the sugar industry, including former Grower Group Innovation Projects. It is hoped that spreading the fallow period over two years is a way of improving productivity from the block.

“For example, if we can grow 60 percent of the crop from 50 percent of the area, that is of course a big advantage for us,” Gerard said.

This pattern could work by following three rows, leaving three, and then repeating across the paddock. This will allow them to synchronise the three-row fertiliser box with the pattern.

“There will be a lot of things to work out and get right, but we are looking forward to having a look at it,” he said.

This year’s harvest started on June 5 and is estimated to be about 17,500t, back from the 20,000t harvested in 2016.

Q208[®] remains their major variety, and they also have increasing amounts of Q240[®] and Q183[®] that are so far performing well. They are also trying out Q251[®] and Q252[®], and in the process of propagating SRA6[®] for a commercial area to be planted later this year.

For more information

Gerard Puglisi

0428 988 136

gtpuglisifarming@bigpond.com



Left: Gerard Puglisi with the Hudson-built wavy disc cultivator.



Below: Close-up of the discs on the cultivator.