



Adding local information to variety management

The Tully region is working together to assess new varieties in a range of conditions, to help the local industry improve variety management decisions.

Millers, growers, productivity services, and SRA are working together in the Tully district to improve variety selection across the region.

The heart of this work is the Tully Variety Management Group (TVMG), which is adding local data and grower observations to produce a local variety guide for new varieties coming through the pipeline from SRA.

Cane Productivity and Development Manager at Tully Sugar Limited, Greg Shannon, said the group has 10 trial sites across the mill area (six for observations and small mill maturity testing and four for germination observations), and is working with a group that varies in number but consistently attracts around 35 growers, representing a large percentage of the district's productivity.

Like most districts, conditions such as rainfall, soil type and pest/disease pressure are highly variable, even sometimes within a short distance. This is especially the case at Tully, which means the local trial sites provide growers with greater information about new varieties, and can help speed up commercial variety adoption.

Greg said the trials assessed factors including maturity curves and crop

characteristics for the different district zones, and soil type, and also raised important issues for consideration such as Pachymetra root rot awareness. If it takes up to five years to fully adopt a variety, the work of this group is designed to speed up the rate of adoption by one or two years by adding to the information already provided by SRA from Final Assessment Trials (FATs) such as yield, tonnes, disease resistance, and harvest management.

The local information is then presented in a small "Tully New Variety" guide lift-out designed to compliment the existing SRA Wet Tropics Variety Guide, as well as shed meetings across the district three times each year. Then, of course, there is the regular talk among the group itself as they watch new varieties progress through the trials. This "Tully New Variety guide" was published for the first time in 2017, after three years of local trial work.

"We have a long approved list of varieties, like everywhere else, but we are refining that long list with our recommended varieties list. We are trying to find the right place for all varieties, but we are also trying to avoid situations where growers are planting too much of the wrong variety and losing money," Greg said.

"It's a process that happens already, but we are adding science and rigour to it and hopefully taking some mystery out of which variety to plant when there are now so many to choose from.

Euramo grower Peter Jackson said the purpose of the trials and the group was about the "industry commercial reality".

"The results of the SRA FAT are useful, but they can also be different to what we experience on the ground," Peter said. "Growers are making decisions with different country and in different parts of the district, so this is helping provide us with information that is on the ground and relevant."

He said the group was helping to avoid situations that he recently experienced while working to reduce his dependence on Q208(b).

"I planted 40 acres of a particular variety, as we had a real concern with the amount of Q208(b) in the ground, and for me personally I have now ploughed that other variety out. The group is working on the information to help us avoid these situations.

"For example, we think Q250(b) and Q253(b) are promising varieties at Tully based on what we have seen over the last few years."

Alf Nucifora farms at the top of the Murray River said he valued the interaction of the group and also how it helped him choose varieties.

"It is a great opportunity for the farmers to put the varieties into a range of conditions and compare them to the standards," he said. "With the help of Greg and the other farmers, that information then gets passed on quickly."

"The group is now well-recognised in Tully and has come a long way since it started in a different incarnation in 2007."

Following on from the local trial work, TSL provide a "whole of farm variety planting" process based on current variety status and performance and using the local variety guide to fast track the adoption of the most promising new varieties. TCPSL also provide the local guide, with the SRA guide at the seed plots.

Other districts are doing their own work on ground-testing varieties through activities such as strip trials or similar work to the TVMG.

Greg added that there were significant benefits for the mill as well, and he thanked the support of the TSL board and in particular the outgoing General Manager, Barry Dun and new CEO Shunjie Guo both who are very supportive of this collaborative approach to improving productivity and cane quality.

"For example, we know from our 2013 survey that Pachymetra is a real soil health issue for us here in Tully and it results in yield loss and cane quality issues such as higher soil levels going into the mill," Greg said.

"Through the variety work, we have an opportunity to fast track the better varieties plus talk about a range of agronomic issues, and it has become a real vehicle for positive engagement between Tully growers and Tully Sugar."



(Over Page) The group checking out Tully Variety Management Group information: Alf Nucifora, Greg Shannon, George Henry, Peter Jackson, and Jason Jackson. (Above) Discussing varieties in the field at Peter Jackson's farm. (Right) Greg Shannon with TSL catches up with Alf Nucifora, George Henry and Peter Jackson to discuss variety management decisions.