



Trial involvement helps information flow on varieties

Plane Creek grower Peter Hackett says open communication between industry and SRA is helping to improve the variety development process.

Central Region grower Peter Hackett has always had a keen interest in new varieties making their way through the development pipeline.

Farming near Koumala, south of Plane Creek, Peter is also passionate about working with SRA's plant breeding team, and the local industry, to achieve improved outcomes for everyone.

That's why he has held Final Assessment Trials (FATs) on his property for the last 12 years.

"This farm is a fairly average soil type for the district and it was unirrigated at the time I started with the trials, so I thought the information coming from this trial would be useful for the rest of the growers in the Plane Creek area," he said. "12 years later and we are still going and it continues to be interesting to observe the trials from the high rise spray tractor and see how much variation there is between different clones."

This was one of the topics under discussion at a recent local shed meeting

at a neighbour's property. At the meeting, SRA Leader for Crossing and Selection, Dr George Piperidis, spoke about new varieties for the Central Region such as SRA9^{ph}, SRA12, and SRA13 as well as the selection process and how the team work with growers such as Peter across the region through on-farm FATs.

Peter's current variety mix mostly consists of Q208^{ph}, Q240^{ph}, Q183^{ph} and KQ228^{ph}, and an increasing amount of Q252^{ph}.

When CaneConnection visited in July, he had completed his first cut. Blocks affected by yellow canopy syndrome (YCS) were disappointing, but other blocks were reasonable given the season, although he added that it may be a struggle to hold tonnage as the season moved on.

In the region, last year's crush ran late and then led directly into a drought across most of the summer, which stalled the growing season.

"In 2017 we had a good crush until the middle of October, and then it rained and sparked the crop off and it started

looking good. But then it forgot to rain until we had about 100mm in one day late in the summer, but so far we're about 500mm below where we should be for the year."

While Peter has supplementary irrigation with hard hose irrigators supplied from a small on-farm dam, it isn't enough to keep up with the peak of the dry conditions.

He farms 150 hectares of his own country, plus an additional 35ha of lease country. He farms on 1.7 metre row spacings, with all farm work – except for harvesting – done themselves.

They green cane trash blanket as much as possible and aim for a legume crop at the end of the crop cycle, although this hasn't been possible in the last few years because conditions were too wet (summer 2017) or too dry (summer 2018).

"We have dabbled in those crops with an eye on soil health, and even though it hasn't always been successful it has been a good learning curve," he said.



"It's important to give it a go, although we also feel we are better off doing these things in a year when the sugar price is reasonable so that we aren't losing money in a year that we can't afford it.

"At the moment we are just trying to ride out the current price slump."

He is a third generation grower and has also been supplying liquid fertiliser to other growers from Wilmar Sugar for the last 32 years, which has been an important part of the farm's diversification. This has expanded this year to the purchase of a rubber-tracked machine to add to the existing three trucks that he, his son-in-law and an employee work with.

It will allow greater flexibility of nutrient application in wet conditions.

"The trucks have their limitations when it rains. Getting bogged is one thing, but we are also very mindful of compaction as we don't want to be negatively impacting the soil in that process of getting the fertiliser on."

(Over page) Peter with the recently-purchased tracked rig for liquid fertiliser application. (Above) Peter and his high-rise sprayer. (Right) Peter pictured with this year's crop.

