



Cane gamble pays off at Casino

A PUSH TO GROW MORE CANE AROUND CASINO IS EXTENDING THE WESTERN REACH OF THE BROADWATER MILL AREA, DELIVERING GOOD RESULTS FOR THE GROWERS, AND HELPING IMPROVE CANE SUPPLY.

BY BRAD PFEFFER



When Glen Cole planted his first block of cane in 2013, it immediately had almost two weeks of wet weather on it.

As he dug the drains to get the water off, and then when the cane took months to start growing properly, he was wondering if he'd made the right decision.

Six years later, and that crop of Q208^ϕ has hardly looked back and sugarcane is a major feature of Glen's farming enterprise near Casino in northern NSW.

His major focus had been on soybeans, some cereal and silage, and cattle, but as problems set in with charcoal root rot with the soybeans (caused by the fungus *Macrophomina phaseolina*), he knew he needed to break the monoculture.

After finally deciding on cane – but only about two weeks before planting – that crop and the others that followed have done well and it was a good decision to go into cane, Glen explained. "It's been pretty good so far. The best we've done for year-old is about 145 tonnes per hectare in a block of Q208^ϕ," he said.

The region around Casino is making an important contribution to cane supply for the Broadwater mill area, and offsetting some of the losses to the industry further east from other land uses. Casino is only about 50km from the Broadwater mill, and it has been in the last seven years or so that several farmers have made the move from double cropping soybeans and cereals to sugarcane.

Glen said the local conditions were comparable to regions closer to the coast. He said annual rainfall is lower, but the frost risk is also less than some of the eastern regions.

It has advantages as well. As relatively new country, yields are generally strong, and the previous soybean regime has helped him keep the paddocks clean of weeds, especially grasses. Like everywhere, weeds are still a constant battle and he keeps on top of them with a high-rise spray coup dual sprayer.

"We haven't ploughed any cane out yet, so I know that down the track it will get harder to maintain productivity, but I'll continue talking to people and working to keep the yield up."

After jumping in to cane, Glen said there was plenty of help along the way from people happy to provide advice. "As long as you are willing to ask, most people will help you out. And of course Rick Beattie from the Ag Services has been a great help to us," he said.

The Coles farm about 300 hectares, with about 120 hectares of cane. They still grow soybeans and some cereals and silage, and run cattle.

His varieties include Q208^ϕ, Q155, Q232^ϕ, Q240^ϕ and Q254^ϕ, with Q208^ϕ and Q240^ϕ being his preferred options.

They do all their own work with the exception of harvesting although, like

most regions, finding labour is an ongoing challenge.

He said 2017 was a good year, with about 12,000 tonne harvested, which included both two-year and one-year cane, and good sugar for the first three rounds.

Glen grows his cane on 1.8 metre rows and is also trying different nutrient options such as chicken manure. In recent years he has put about five tonne/ha of the manure from a nearby chicken farm on the bean crop before the cane, and then direct drilling cane into the bed.

"For the last two years we haven't worked the bed after we've taken the beans off."

With the help of the Ag Services, Glen gets an analysis of the manure and also works back from the soybeans to calculate nutrient rates. He also puts lime on the blocks before the bean crop.

"The pH isn't too bad – usually between five and six – but the cane is in the ground for five or six years, so we are trying to have things as good as we can from the start."

At the time CaneConnection visited in January, dry weather was starting to put the brakes on a lot of the cane. ■

(Over page bottom) Still in its first crop cycle, this new country around Casino is producing solid yields for Glen Cole. (Over page top) Glen Cole with cane that will be harvested as a two-year crop. (Above) Casino farmer Glen Cole checks over the crop during dry conditions in January 2019.