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Controlled traffic helping improve soil health

Brad Pfeffer
Sugar Research Australia Limited

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It was after a trip to Maryborough that Far North Queensland farmers Steven and Leo Bonso saw the potential of adopting controlled traffic at their farm.

The Babinda father and son were visiting Tony Chapman’s farm, where Tony had been practicing controlled traffic for about 20 years.

“When we poked a stick into the bed, it sunk straight down into the soil, and we saw that there was something in it for us,” Steven Bonso explained.

The Bonso family grow cane on about 3,150 hectares near Babinda and after that visit they set about learning more about improved farming systems, especially with local support from the MSF Sugar agronomy team. They soon decided to widen their rows from 1.65 metres to 1.8 metres.

They started with a trial block about four years ago, and after seeing no difference in yield since then, they’ve committed to the change across their farms starting in 2018.

Steven said their investments included a dual-row planter bought from the Burdekin, and getting a new fertiliser box built that is adjustable and could accommodate both the 1.65m rows and the 1.8m rows as they transition.

They do their own harvesting, with the harvester already set up with a long elevator, so the main investment entailed installing GPS.

Their main tractor was modified to a 3.45m spacing and Steven said this width was the limit so that they could float it on a truck when moving between farms. It originally had dual wheels on the back, but they moved to singles and also made their own spacers for the front.

“The whole reason we went this way is to save time,” he explains.

Time is precious for Steven. There’s not just the farm to run, but also the harvesting business, and a freight business that hauls liquid fertiliser and also cane for parts of the region where there is no rail network. He is also a Director of the local CANEGROWERS and a freight harvesting business, and a freight.

They have also taken the first steps for adopting a legume fallow. In recent years they worked with Derek Sparkes from the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries on testing a range of legume crops.

“I was all set to do it this year, but the weather was a disaster and we had well over two metres of rain for the summer, so it didn’t happen,” he said.

“This year I will have my own planter, so by the time the season finishes the legumes will be going in straight behind the harvester.”

In the past, they have gone for a sprayed-out fallow as they haven’t wanted to disturb the soil and risk erosion. They’ve also been concerned about growing legumes in the wet conditions, but after working with DAF, MSF Sugar, and observing other farmers, they decided it would work and was worth a go. Steven said the best option appeared to be Maringa cowpea, but they also were taking a keen interest in mixed species fallows that are the subject of research trials and are already being grown on some farms in the region.

Steven sees it all as part of the farming system to improve soil health and he continues to be involved in industry activities and events looking to improve soil condition.

He uses liquid fertiliser and said it was easier and quicker than fertiliser out of the bag. “It has been a lot of outlay, but it has been worth it with the area we are covering.

“We have definitely gone into improved farming systems in a bigger way since we became involved with Project Uplift, We have scale, but everything still has a cost attached to it, and with sugar prices being low, we need every bit of extra help we can get. It has enabled us to do all these things.”