



(Left) Mick and Cameron Adrejc are continuing to innovate in the business to keep things profitable and sustainable. (Below) Greg and John Westaway are adopting improved farming systems practices with the help of their contractor, Salmec, and Project Uplift.

POSITIVE PRACTICE CHANGE DOMINO EFFECT



Far North Queensland cane growers Mick Adrejc and Mark Savina have always tried to extract the maximum from their farming operation.

Running a large and diverse farming business called Salmec, Mick and Mark are business partners owning and leasing farms across about 1000 hectares. They also run contract harvesting and planting for a further 300ha of cane country in the Northern Beaches area outside Cairns.

For many years they have been keen participants in a broad range of research trials and innovations, to help inform early adoption of improved practices and technology for their farms.

Mick is the first to admit that their scale has helped their journey to running an improved farming system (IFS), but also adds that they have still had their share of challenges along the way.

One of their biggest changes came about 10 years ago with a shift from 1.52m to 1.8m rows using GPS guidance. Their investments included purchasing GPS units and base stations, installing flipper rollers on harvesters, widening some implements, and buying some new machinery. It took about five years to change all their machinery and their paddocks.

The result has been significant reduction in labour, less maintenance and reduced fuel consumption.

Mick reckons yields have held, but the biggest benefit has been with looking after the cane stool.

"We've been on this system long enough to have harvested through some really wet years, and saw how much the stool suffered on narrow rows," he said. "We've got paddocks that are going an extra ratoon now, and for our size area we are talking about 20 hectares each year that we don't have to plant because of longer ratoons."

He said that controlled traffic was only part of their ongoing improvements, and that these changes had been accelerated in recent years with the assistance of the Project Uplift Farming Systems Initiative run by MSF Sugar.

Project Uplift is based around farming systems principles first developed as part of the Sugar Yield Decline Joint Venture, specifically controlled traffic, minimum tillage, legume break crops, and green cane trash blanketing.

Mick said most of these aspects of the farming system were established in some way on Salmec's farms, but Project Uplift has helped them fine-tune the system. For example, through the project they have modified an implement for deep ripping to break up the compaction layer and to ensure they are getting the most from their controlled traffic.

They are also continuing to improve drainage, and are increasing their use of legume fallow crops, including investigating options such as peanuts. They are also continuing to improve their nutrient and chemical management.

Project Uplift offers interest free loans for the purchase and modification of machinery, cash grants of 50 percent for farm re-design and drainage, and agronomy support from the MSF Sugar Agronomy team.

Because it synchronises with delivering positive water quality outcomes for the Reef, it is a program supported by the Australian Government Reef Trust.

For the cane growing area just north of Cairns, the adoption of IFS practices at Salmec is having ripple effects for their grower clients in the region, allowing these growers to make a similar transition more quickly and affordably.

In some cases, it is allowing these growers to tackle changes that would have been very difficult on their own.

John Westaway and his son Greg use Salmec for their harvesting and planting, which means they have happily come along for the ride with the IFS.

"For us, Mark and Mick start the change and we fine tune our equipment to fit," John Westaway said. "It has been a big saving in fuel and time. We only receive so much for our crop, so we need to be getting smarter about our costs."

Even with Salmec's support, the Westaways had their own risks and challenges, which is where Project Uplift has given them a leg-up.

The project has helped with drainage work and they continue to tackle the built-up compaction problem on their farm. They are also bringing in a legume rotation.

Part of the Westaway's farm is on the Captain Cook highway, making it highly visible to thousands of tourists and commuters each day. Groups of overseas farmers on tourist trips also occasionally visit the region's farms to learn about local agriculture.

This is why they are keen to take part in Project Uplift, which is helping them continue to improve sustainability and productivity.

"We're very conscious of the Reef and the community around us. Before we do anything here, we are really thinking about it," John said.

"When I started farming the rows were four feet nine inches (about 144cm) and all our other farming practices were vastly different. We keep changing, but with change comes cost and we can't just shift all our practices every year.

"That's where Project Uplift and MSF have helped. It has worked out really well for us."

John added that with challenges such as low sugar prices, and local issues such as urban encroachment and road resumptions, they needed to make the most from every hectare of land.

MSF Sugar agronomist Noel Wright said the project was about working collaboratively with growers.

"We aren't telling growers how to farm, but are assisting them to tweak their farming regime and assist them with practices that make them more profitable. This creates opportunities for the next generation to come back to the farm – which is what we have here with Greg Westaway and Cameron Adrejc," Mr Wright said.

"For MSF, it is about sustainable and productive cane supply."

The Salmec business also works with a range of research projects, which also helps spread the research outcomes and information through the local area.

Following the 2018 harvest, they have also trialled low-tech irrigation using trickle tape on the surface, although they came in fairly late during the very dry period that led-up to December 2018.

When CaneConnection visited in March, they had already received over two metres of rain, but Mick said there was still a clear visual difference between the irrigated and the non-irrigated.

"We are just starting so that we can assess the cost and the yield, to work out where we might go from here. The tape on the ground is designed for single use, but if we can get two or three uses out of it, that would have a big influence on cost." ■