



SUGAR PLAYS AN IMPORTANT PART OF DIVERSITY MIX

THE ATHERTON TABLELAND IS ONE OF THE FEW PLACES IN THE WORLD THAT CAN PRODUCE ALMOST EVERYTHING FOR YOUR SMOKO INCLUDING MILK, SUGAR, TEA AND COFFEE. THE GALLO FAMILY ARE MAKING A GO OF TWO OF THESE IMPORTANT COMMODITIES FOR THE REGION: SUGAR AND MILK. BY BRAD PFEFFER

For the Gallo family near Yungaburra, sugarcane is a diversification strategy.

They aren't long term cane growers and you are just as likely to see Holstein cows grazing the paddocks or a busload of tourists going in their driveway as you are to see a paddock full of cane on their farm.

The family history on the Atherton Tableland goes back over 80 years, always with a strong focus on dairying, and it is only since 2012 that they have made a significant jump into sugarcane.

Today they grow just over 150 hectares of cane on country that had mostly been devoted to corn for silage for the dairy. They still are one of the major dairying businesses on the Tableland, milking 300 cows that supply milk for both the main factory in Malanda as well as their own on-farm manufacturing, which is complemented by their tourism business and café called Gallo Dairyland. Through their own factory, they have a strong focus on specialty chocolates and cheeses.

Johnny Gallo runs the business with his wife Linda and parents Frank and Ann, and he said they were attracted to the cane industry to help with tough times in the dairy industry.

"As a farmer, we wanted to grow something where you have a product that someone wants. Horticulture can be risky like that, and we saw MSF Sugar as very supportive of us coming into the industry," he said. "We also wanted something low risk, and that could fit in with the intense activity that is already happening on the farm with the dairying and tourism."

Five years later, Johnny said he was still working to be a better sugarcane grower.

"With the farm here, there are other things that demand my attention even when I've set aside time for the cane, so I know

there's room to continue to improve our yields and efficiency," he said.

One of the steps he is taking has been to get involved in Project Uplift, which is run by MSF Sugar and is designed to help growers adopt improved farming system practices.

He has shifted about 36 hectares to 1.8 metre rows so far, and will also be introducing a legume fallow as more of his country heads towards the end of its first crop cycle.

"We had grown a bit of cane in 2005, and we actually started with 1.8 metres then, and saw that the haulout bins were up out of the row because the elevator on the harvester wasn't long enough," he explained. "So in 2012 we started with 1.65m, but now as we switch back we can see that controlled traffic and wider rows is working with the harvester and the haulouts. The harvester has since been fitted with a flipper roller which enables the haulout bins to remain in the traffic zone.

"I've seen the information on compaction supplied by the MSF agronomy team, and it makes sense. I'll be continuing with moving to controlled traffic as long as I don't have a yield loss."

He will also be moving to zonal tillage, which is another of the principles being encouraged through Project Uplift.

Johnny said that he was still learning when it came to varieties, but that he was making better decisions through planting larger trial areas usually of just under 10 hectares and accessing variety information through SRA.

"I have SRA6th and SRA10th planted as tissue culture this year, so I'll plant them out to start looking at them. To keep ahead, you have to do your homework at a reasonably commercial scale.

"This is especially the case here. We are colder and wetter than the coast and we get frosts. The Tableland itself has three to four different climates and soil changes, so I like to see how things perform on my place."

He welcomed the commitment from MSF Sugar in helping with practice change and water quality, especially through Project Uplift.

Even though the Gallo family are 'inland' cane growers, because their farm is in the Barron River catchment, flowing down to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, they are an important part of the picture in terms of improving water quality outcomes through Project Uplift.

"MSF have committed funds and people to help motivate farmers to join the program. Without that, I wouldn't have known about it.

"They are also innovative in their own business, at the mill, and on the farms as they step out of the old farming system, so they're leading by example.

"The sugar price is out of our hands, but we can all work together to be as efficient as we can." ■

(Over page top) Johnny Gallo checking over the crop earlier this year. (Over page bottom) Noel Wright (MSF Sugar), Johnny Gallo, and Nigel Young (MSF Sugar). Atherton Tableland farmers who are in catchments that flow to the east are an important part of the water quality outcomes being achieved through Project Uplift. Farms where drainage water does run to the Great Barrier Reef catchment are eligible for other initiatives through MSF Sugar.

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