

FAT CATTLE AND BIG CANE – NUTRITION JUST ONE PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

MAKING A SMALL FARM PAY ITS WAY AND JUGGLING WORK OFF-FARM IS A CHALLENGE BEING TACKLED BY MANY IN THE INDUSTRY. FOR CASEY JONES, HE IS MAKING IT SUCCEED THROUGH HIS INVOLVEMENT IN A PROJECT KNOWN AS RP161. BY BRAD PFEFFER

For Herbert Region grower Casey Jones, everything he does has big ripple effects for the profitability of his farm business.

Farming a relatively small operation of 40 hectares near Bambaroo about 30km south of Ingham, Casey also spends half his time working at a mine near Collinsville on a seven-on/seven-off roster.

Casey is also a relative newcomer to the industry, moving to the farm about seven years ago after spending most his life in the beef industry on a family property in the upper reaches of the Burdekin catchment.

So, with much to learn, a relatively small farming area, and precious windows to get his farming done, Casey reckons the key to keeping the farm profitable and sustainable is sourcing reliable advice.

This information to help him make the right decisions has come from a range of sources, starting with the blokes next door.

"This southern area of the Herbert has plenty of challenges, and I believe these challenges have also helped the district continue to innovate," he said. "When I started, I never knew anything different than planting on 1.8 metre rows because that was what my neighbours were doing.

"I've also planted about 2500 trees along the creek, all of which are over 10 metres high now, just as a lot of the guys around here have done. Like a lot of areas, we are working hard and doing great things for the environment."

Not only has Casey learnt from his neighbours, but he has also been a keen participant in industry workshops and meetings and relies on support from Herbert Cane Productivity Services Ltd (HCPSL).

This led him to get involved in a new project for the Herbert district called *Tailored nutrient and farm management solutions for the Herbert catchment area* (or "Herbert RP161"). The broader RP161 project, developed through the Queensland Reef Water Quality Program, has already been running in the Burdekin and is also being undertaken in the Central Region through on-ground providers in each region.

The RP161 project provides practical assistance and one-on-one extension to growers and aims to improve productivity and profitability while achieving sustainability outcomes.

Casey said that in his case, improving his nutrient-use efficiency was about looking at everything happening on the

farm, which is why it was valuable to have HCPSL delivering the project locally.

"With cattle you can have lots of reasons why they are not gaining weight – and it's not just about what you feed them," he said. "There could be eight different things to get right, and you might only need to fix one or two, and then when you do – all of a sudden they are getting fat and have shiny coats."

"With sugarcane, the challenge might not always be nitrogen. I don't want to look at nitrogen as the easy way out."

HCPSL Extension Agronomists, Adam Royle and Shannon O'Brien provide advice to Casey through the project.

For Casey, the conversation with Adam and Shannon started around Pachymetra and ways of reducing his reliance on Q208[®], which is about half of his farm.

The RP161 project has only recently started in the Herbert, and the next step has been the development of whole-of-farm nutrient management plans based on individual farm data, farm visits, phone support and training.

"This program will make it a lot easier for me to achieve best management practice. It is proven and tested science based on the SIX EASY STEPS, so I've got the evidence to make decisions," he said.

Adam Royle said his role in the project was to provide independent advice to help Casey make farm management decisions.

"We offer open advice, but I am also conscious that Casey is the one who has to live with those choices and make it work for him," Adam explained. "So if he makes a choice that I can't fault, of course I support that. We work with each grower on their own unique situation to achieve the best outcome."

The RP161 Nutrient Management projects is delivered by Farmacist, Mackay Area Productivity Services, and Herbert Cane Productivity Services Limited (HCPSL) and funded through the Queensland Government Reef Water Quality Program and Australian Government Reef Trust. ■

(Over page) HCPSL Extension Agronomist Adam Royle and grower Casey Jones discussing tactics for improving productivity and enhancing sustainability. (Left) Casey Jones has planted more than 2500 trees along this section of creek.

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