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Lessons from across Bass Strait drive sustainable production

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Lessons From Across Bass Strait
Drive Sustainable Production

PULLING UP STUMPS AND MOVING FROM THE APPLE ISLE TO CALEN
IS A MASSIVE CHANGE IN GEARS FOR ANYONE. BUT DALE AND KARINDA ANDERSON HAVE DISCOVERED THAT WHILE PLENTY OF THINGS ARE DIFFERENT, MANY THINGS ARE JUST THE SAME.

BY BRAD PFEFFER

Dale and Karinda Anderson don’t have a lifetime of cane-growing experience under their belts. They’ve only been at their 160-hectare Calen district farm, between Mackay and Proserpine, since 2016. And while cane is still quite new to them, they have jumped into the industry with broad experience in agriculture across Australia, ranging from running a diverse horticulture, opium poppy, and sheep enterprise in Tasmania, to driving cotton pickers and grain headers across vast areas of Queensland and New South Wales.

This experience, and an eagerness to learn how to maximise their productivity, is helping them bring the best lessons from other industries to their sugarcane.

“In other crops, we only had days or hours for our window of spraying or irrigation,” Dale explained. “The chemical regime was tight and we needed to chip away at it every five to seven days so we could get everything done on time.

“If the weeds got away or if we missed a fungicide spray, then we would lose the crop. The outlay for a crop like potatoes is around $17,000 per hectare, so it is an expensive mistake if you don’t get everything right.

“For cane, there can be a bigger window, but we still try and get it done on time. A cane harvester can handle weeds better than machinery for other crops, but we don’t want to apply fertiliser to grow weeds — there’s no CCS or tonnes in weeds.”

He said applying this precision mindset to sugarcane helped to deliver outcomes for their farm, and it was also the reason why they have sought external advice to ensure they were ticking every box with their cane.

This led them to get involved in the Complete Nutrient Management for Cane Farming project (also known as “RP161”), developed through the Queensland Reef Water Quality Program, and run in the Central Region by Farmacist and Mackay Area Productivity Services (MAPS).

With the support of Farmacist Agronomist Che Trendall, the Andersons have worked with her to develop a whole of farm nutrient management plan, as well as having in-depth discussions on the range of factors that influence productivity.

“We’ve learnt a lot through Che and this project,” Dale said. “For example, she is helping us with data to allow us to decide whether we use dundar or granular fertiliser, and we also discuss things like nutrient rates and chemical selection.

“I feel we’ve made good progress in the last 12-18 months with the farm, but we’ve also made a few mistakes, and are a long way from where we want to be. This project can help with that.”

Dale said that the principles behind the SIX EASY STEPS, which form the basis of the RP161 project, are something he understood because the principles were similar to those he had seen in other industries.

“And if you go over the recommended rates, then you increase your fertiliser bill, don’t get any extra yield, and end up with a reduction in net return.”

The RP161 project is not just about nutrient management — it covers the whole farm and works closely with each grower to determine what is needed in their situation.

For example, the Andersons were very passionate about ensuring they are using the best possible planting material, which is something ingrained in them from their experience in horticulture. This has seen Dale recently do 11 trips to the Mackay Area Productivity Services (MAPS) clean seed at Victoria Plains, on the other side of Mackay, clocking up over 1600km with his ute and trailer.

He said it was not a corner that he could afford to cut.

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“You just have to have fresh material to keep the disease out.”

Che Trendall said that the Mackay component of the project had covered 97 farms across more than 3700 hectares since it started in 2018.

She said the project had helped growers sustainably and profitably optimise their inputs and achieve productivity, profitability and sustainability outcomes by following the SIX EASY STEPS nutrient management guidelines.

The RP161 Nutrient Management project 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.

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