

BREAKING NEW GROUND AT TULLY

THE DI MAURO FAMILY HAVE USED THE PHILOSOPHY OF "NEVER STOP LEARNING" TO GUIDE THE STAGGERED DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMER CATTLE PROPERTY TO SUGARCANE PRODUCTION.

Sam Di Mauro is a third-generation farmer and has grown cane in the Tully district all his life, but he still says that every season has something to teach him.

In 2019, the biggest lesson was the importance of farm drainage to deal with the challenging conditions of growing cane in the wettest part of Australia, in a year that has been especially wet.

"From December until the start of the crush in June this year we only had 26 sunny days," Sam Di Mauro said of his property not far from El Arish on the northern end of the Tully district. "That came after an incredibly dry finish to 2018. The early-cut ratoons suffered with the dry and then, when the rain came, it hit in a deluge. Our cane never got away this year."

At his home farm at El Arish, his drainage challenge is helped by a natural gravel layer under the farm. However, it is a different story to the south of the district at Bilyana, where the Di Mauros have bought a 700-hectare cattle property and have been converting some of that land to sugarcane in recent years.

Together with his sons Jason and Matthew, Sam has applied a lifetime of farming knowledge to developing this new country, but he added that they were still learning along the way.

"The property has never been cane," he said. "It was a managed investment scheme tree plantation until Cyclone Yasi blew the trees out of the ground. Since we bought the property, there has been a lot of work laser levelling and getting the ground ready over several years.

"It only has a thin layer of topsoil and hits clay underneath, which means that the top layer saturates quickly when it rains, so we know we need to have that water running off with our drainage." This year has really shown the importance of drainage.

"When we started, we had made the bulk of our investment in the property and there was a limit to what we could throw at the development, so we flattened out the holes and did the planting as best we could by eye. We can see now that the cane suffers in those depressions.

"It is not a wet block, but it really tries you out because of the saturation."

They have now put drains in every 77 rows, almost double of that of when they first started, and are in the process of laser levelling the final parts of the property in 2019, doing this work whenever they get a break in the weather.

Their plan is to plant cane on about 400 hectares in total of the property, which is the limit of their cane assignment. The final 120ha of this 400ha needs to be planted this year, and Sam knows that they have a big job ahead of them.

The Di Mauros have developed the country to 1.9 metre spacings growing dual row, which they have been using for six years. They made the switch after Jason Di Mauro saw the dual-row for himself driving haul-outs, and they decided to purchase a second-hand billet planter.

"We're looking at reducing compaction and improving soil health, and we'd previously been single row on five foot four inches (1.65m).

"The wide row has its challenges especially when things aren't uniform. Some days the tippers might sink and change the profile, and that makes it hard for the harvester operators to adjust the basecutter height. But, in saying that, we had a similar challenge with single row."

With the new farm, Sam has also learnt that new country still requires precision management.

He said the first three years saw them achieve 100 tonne per hectare yields and CCS above the mill, but tonnes fell away after that.

"The first round of soil sampling showed everything was okay, but we've gone in again now and found some deficiencies that we need to address, and identified that we need phosphorous, copper, calcium and zinc."

They have grown fallow crops in the past including legumes and rice, but the focus on the new farm means that they have paused growing a fallow crop until they get on top of things at the new place.

The Di Mauros have cut up to 50,000 tonne of their own cane and are hoping to do about 70,000 tonne once the development is complete. They also run a sizeable harvesting contract using a John Deere 2017 CH570.

Sam said their main variety remained Q208[®], but they are also growing some newer varieties such as SRA6[®]. He praised the work of Tully Sugar Limited Cane Productivity and Development Manager, Greg Shannon, through the Tully Variety Management Group in helping provide information for making variety decisions.

"We want to reduce our dependence on Q208[®], as we've seen what can happen when a disease hits a good variety like Q124 with Orange Rust. The Variety Management Group tells us about different varieties in different parts of the district, and takes some of the risk out of our decisions.

"For us, we could be planting 50ha to 70ha per year, and we can't afford to plant parts of that to varieties that don't work for us. By Greg and the growers taking their trials to fourth and fifth ratoon, yes it takes time, but it gives us a good idea on these varieties." ■

(Right) Sam Di Mauro in the shed during another of the Tully district's wet days in 2019.

