

(Below) Rebekah Pace, Briannan Pace and Shannon O'Brien (HCPSL) are working together to improve their nutrient management and other farming practices. (Over page) Ground prep for planting earlier this year.

# NEXT GENERATION SETS THE PACE OF SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT

YOUNG OR OLD, EVERYONE PITCHES IN AT PACE FARMING IN THE HERBERT, WITH THE FAMILY OPERATION CONTINUING TO LOOK FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE THEIR SUSTAINABILITY AND PROFITABILITY. BY BRAD PFEFFER



## It's a family operation at Pace Farming near Bambaroo at the Southern end of the Herbert district.

Running a large-scale business, they grow cane over about 900 hectares, also grow watermelons and pumpkins across part of their fallow, grow legume manure crops for the remainder of their fallows, and also run a significant pineapple farm at Rollingstone. This all means the work rarely stops, and everyone is always pitching in.

This was exactly the case when CaneConnection visited in August this year. The family was in the thick of planting, with fourth generation growers Rebekah and Briannan busy fixing a busted hydraulic hose so they could finish the job.

Their father Allan (third generation) was also busy in the shed, cousin Jeffrey (fourth generation) was in the paddock on the rotary hoe, and grandfather Roy (second generation) also continues to help out on the tractor.

For Rebekah and Briannan, they always wanted to come back to farming.

Both women are in their early 20s. Briannan came straight back to the farm after high school, and Rebekah had a short stint at university looking at other options before deciding that the farm was where she wanted to be. There is no job on the farm that they bat an eyelid about having a go at.

"Like a lot of kids, we always spent our school holidays around the farm," Rebekah said. "Whether it was picking pineapples or working in the cane, we always enjoyed it, so it made sense to come back."

Briannan said that they had the benefit of learning from decades of experience from their father and grandfather, but she also said that they were continuing to innovate and bring new ideas into the business.

This year, Rebekah and Briannan have jumped into a project called Complete Nutrient Management Planning for Cane Farming (also known as "Herbert RP161"), developed through the Queensland Reef Water Quality Program, and delivered by Herbert Cane Productivity Services Limited (HCPSL) and Farmacist in the Herbert region.

Through this project, they have been given comprehensive information on soil tests and EM mapping, all linked back to Google Earth, and an easy to follow nutrient management plan, along with an array of other useful information to help them improve productivity and sustainability.

"I enjoy the education I'm receiving through the project and having Shannon (O'Brien) from HCPSL step us through the technology and information," Briannan said. "We've had the privilege of learning from our grandfather, and father, and now technology is changing quickly and we are seeing a bit of everything."

Through their involvement in this project, they are looking forward to refining their nutrient management across the farm and seeing the effect upon their productivity and profitability.

Their improvement to nutrient management follows the adoption of a range of modern farming system and innovative practices in recent years, including long-time use of controlled traffic, legume fallows, and reduced tillage.

They have begun a zonal till system for mill mud and ash. By using a zonal applicator, it helps reduce transport costs from the mill and gives them access to a method of improving soil health that had previously been out of their reach.

HCPSL Extension Agronomist, Adam Royle, said the project was primarily focussed on nutrient management, but it also included discussion about a range of productivity issues occurring on each farm.

"Quite often we've visited growers to talk about soil test results, and we discuss a range of things over half a day, as the grower has several issues they've been thinking about for a long time. We talk about these ideas, from a technical standpoint, to see whether they stack up before they make change," he said.

"Our focus is on nutrients, but everything from farming systems to herbicides to pests and diseases comes into play."

He said these full range of factors had a crucial relationship with nutrient use.

"As we've found with the Pace family, we can help identify those factors, looking at soil maps, EM mapping, to get the best outcome.

"An example is that growers may have traditionally taken soil samples from their poorer growing patches of the paddock. It is human nature to want to fix the poorer performing areas.

"But we want to make sure we continue to do things right where the cane is going well, so it can continue making money, which means sampling from the high performing areas too.

"The project takes a step back and looks at the whole picture, rather than just one factor like nitrogen."

Shannon O'Brien said the Pace family had a strong history of soil testing, but the project was bringing all the information together in a format that they could use, both in a hard-copy book and the Google Earth data that can be looked at from their phone, anywhere on the farm.

"It's a really nice step into the world of precision agriculture," Shannon said. ■

**The RP161 Nutrient Management project is delivered by Farmacist, MAPS, and HCPSL and funded through the Queensland Government Reef Water Quality Program and Australian Government Reef Trust.**

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