

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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Christian Lago is a third-generation farmer with 520 hectares of cultivation, including lease country, near Brandon.

After gaining an understanding of nutrient management through an earlier version of the RP161 project (known as RP20), he jumped at the chance to continue to improve his nutrient management with the assistance of Farmacist, through RP161

"The biggest thing that I have learned is that the cane will only grow as far as the most limiting factor allows," Christian said. "We need to balance nutrition with good farming practices and the result is a good crop of cane."

"We are giving the plant what it needs, when it needs it. We are sampling right across our farms, as before this project we would usually sample the poorer areas to find out what was lacking. We want to understand those good areas and keep working on things that put more money in our pocket. When prices are down, it becomes even more important to be doing everything we can."

Christian has been working with Alice Warner from Farmacist, and Alice said



the project had helped Christian look at practices including EC mapping, which has assisted with gypsum and lime application.

"The program is tailored to Christian's farms and his unique challenges," Alice explained.

Christian said Farmacist had also helped with his second crop of soybeans, which he hoped would bring in additional income and boost soil health. This year was his second crop, planted in late July, with plans to harvest mid December. Depending on the weather, he may

aim for another crop of beans before planting cane in April/May 2020.

"It is new to us, so we are ironing out the kinks," he explained.

Christian said the RP161 project encouraged positive practice change with growers. "It is a learning experience working together. With farming, every year is different, but as a general trend I believe we are seeing better results." ■

(Above) Christian Lago and Alice Warner, Farmacist, in a crop of soybeans earlier this year, with the Pioneer Mill in the background.

# FARMING SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS DELIVERING PROFITABILITY & SUSTAINABILITY

Dino Poletto has a mantra when it comes to adopting new practices: **"You must maintain productivity. If you don't, you're history."**

Farming with his son Terry near Giru in the Burdekin, the Polettes grow about 30,000 tonne of cane each year and are enthusiastic about improving practices at their two properties.

Two years ago, they started growing soybeans and mungbeans as cash crops and to improve soil health. They have adopted GPS and a controlled-traffic system around their 1.6 metre row system, and have continued to reduce

fertiliser and chemical inputs as well as reduce cultivation.

Dino said they focused their farming system on being efficient with their inputs because their main goal is to ensure their business is sustainable.

He added that part of this approach meant they needed to ensure they were using the best possible science to optimise their nutrient application, and that they were doing everything else right on farm to ensure their inputs were working effectively.

"Farmacist have been very helpful. They take a soil sample, give us an evaluation, and help us with exactly what we need, and that's what we go by," Dino explained.

the Burdekin called Complete Nutrient Management Planning for Cane Farming (also known as "RP161"), developed through the through the Queensland Reef Water Quality Program.

Through RP161, the Polettes receive detailed information about nutrient management through soil samples, as well as about a range of other productivity issues.

"Farmacist have been very helpful. They take a soil sample, give us an evaluation, and help us with exactly what we need, and that's what we go by," Dino explained.

"We find it very successful and helpful because science is the most important part of anything and farming is no different. They are providing us the information on the science."

The project has helped the Polettes reduce their nitrogen rates and maintain production, which Dino described as a win.

"Otherwise we can't afford to stay in the industry. It is the difference between survival and going under."

He said the program was delivering a benefit for him as a grower, while also delivering environmental outcomes.

"The Great Barrier Reef is a thing of natural beauty and it must be protected," he said. "Farmers also have to make a living, and this project is helping us find that sweet spot."

The project has been running since 2016 in the Burdekin, and it has worked across more than 210 farms over more than 23,000 hectares.

Farmacist agronomist, Heidi Hatch, said that the program provides a legacy and a pathway forward well after the completion of the project.



"Growers really appreciate the nutrient plans and spatial recording of their data," she said. "Having all of their soil test and electrical conductivity (EC) data easily accessible through a simple geographic information system (GIS) platform allows them to easily see all of their historical and current information in one place allowing them to make informed decisions."

"Tailoring nutritional plans to their farm makes it personal and relevant not only for the project year, but identifies a

strong platform that growers can use going forward.

"The tools provided as part of the program such as moisture probes, EC data and soil tests have been well received and growers are using them to get a better insight into improving other aspects of farm management." ■

(Over page) Dino Poletto on the tractor planting earlier this year. (Above) Evan Shannon and Heidi Hatch with Farmacist checking out the planting job at the Poletto property.