

WORKSHOPS HELP TRIGGER PRACTICE CHANGE

THROUGH AN INVOLVEMENT IN INDUSTRY WORKSHOPS AND PROGRAMS, AS WELL AS SOME HELPFUL NEIGHBOURLY ADVICE, MICHAEL SANTAROSSA IS IMPLEMENTING IMPROVED FARMING SYSTEM PRACTICES TO IMPROVE SOIL HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY AND PROFITABILITY. BY BRAD PFEFFER



(Over page) Michael in a crop of mungbeans on November 7th this year. (Right) Michael Santarossa says the 2020 season is off to a decent start.



Michael Santarossa has had cane around him for his whole life, but it is only in the last three years that he has come back to farming full time.

Farming at Mulgrave just south of Cairns, Michael spent about 20 years in the mining industry before making a staggered return to the family farm in recent years through working with his father Alan on weekends, and then leasing country.

Upon making a go of things full time in 2016, his first step was to regularly attend industry workshops and to gather as much information as possible from his father and their neighbours.

Three years in, he continues to get advice where he can, and is now putting it to use by improving soil health through modified farming practices for the 145 hectares that he farms together with Alan.

This has seen Michael starting the transition to a 1.8 metre row spacing (from 1.6m) and a fallow cropping plan this year.

"Some of this country hasn't had a break crop in my lifetime," Michael explained.

"There is no changing the sugar price, so we need to change something with the farming system to get our costs down.

"Most of us have heard the soil health story around compaction and the benefits of fallow crops," he said. "But it was at the workshops where I saw the science behind these practices and decided that I needed to change something.

"Improving soil health is something that will take at least five years to implement and see benefits across the whole farm, but the early indications from the row spacing is that the cane is performing well."

A significant amount of this change has also been helped through collaboration

with MSF Sugar on Project Uplift, which works with growers on adopting improved farming system practices including controlled traffic, minimum tillage, fallow break crops, and green cane harvesting and maintaining the trash blanket.

It is supported by the Australian Government Reef Trust Program which offers grant funding for drainage improvements as well as agronomic advice through MSF Sugar. Michael had been interested in adopting the SRA Farming System for some time and noticed that it was gaining greater acceptance in the Mulgrave farming community. When attending Australia's first Regenerative Cane Farming Forum in Ingham in March 2019, Michael saw the benefits of the system firsthand and joined Project Uplift shortly afterwards.

Michael has received information and guidance from the likes of Cane Supply Field Officer (Mulgrave Mill), Matt Hession, and Project Uplift team members Noel Wright and Nigel Young, to add to information that he continues to receive from his neighbours. The project has also helped him invest in laser levelling, something critical for maintaining production in the Wet Tropics.

When CaneConnection visited in early November, Michael's mungbeans were progressing well and were headed toward a harvest around mid-December, so long as wet weather doesn't put a dampener on his plans.

"We will just see how it goes," he said.

Michael said that mungbeans had the advantage of being a quick crop and would hopefully allow him to beat the wet season. However, he said he was also keen to give peanuts a go, especially for his loamy red soils, which represent part

of the farm.

"There are a couple of farmers who have been growing peanuts here for a long time, but it is also a new industry here in a lot of ways. For someone like me, wanting to put in 5-10 hectares, I can't justify buying the gear so it is difficult to make the next step."

He is still keen to give them a try and in the long term sees that GPS guidance is another next step to allow him to continue to improve soil health. These plans are parked for the time being due to the low sugar price.

He grows a mix of varieties including Q208[®], Q200[®], Q250[®] and Q253[®], with an increasing amount of Q240[®] over the last two years.

He said this year's crop was probably down about 15 percent compared to 2018, mostly due to a very dry finish to 2018, followed by extremely wet weather in the first half of 2019.

"This year has been dry as well through the harvest, but as at early November we've had about 75mm more than this time last year, so the cane is off to a good start for 2020."

He also soil tests extensively to make sure he is running the farm efficiently. "If the crop needs it, we put it on. If it doesn't need it, then we don't. We make sure we have all the information to make the right decision, and that's the advantage of attending industry workshops, to make sure we are being efficient and making the right decisions." ■

