

(Over top left) Gavin Rodman and Ben Spann weighing fertiliser as part of the calibration.
 (Over top right) Ben Spann, Gavin Rodman and Sebastian Garcia-Cuenca calibrating Ben's fertiliser box for the application of one of the trials in November 2019.
 (Over middle right) Larry Spann (pictured) and Ben Spann grow cane on over 200 hectares at Norwell. (Over bottom) In the field calibrating the fertiliser box for the trials.

EASY AS 1, 2 3 ... 4, 5, 6

SRA IS WORKING WITH LOCAL INDUSTRY IN THE ROCKY POINT REGION TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES FOR THAT AREA, HELPING IMPROVE PROFITABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY.
 BY BRAD PFEFFER

Father and son team Larry and Ben Spann grow cane on about 200 hectares of lease country in the Rocky Point region near Norwell.

They see a solid future for the industry to the point where they are developing another 30ha of country for planting this year. However, at the same time, they are also acutely aware that the low sugar price means that they must be efficient with their inputs and reduce costs.

This need to improve efficiency and profitability for the business was a key reason that Ben has worked with fellow Rocky Point grower, Josh Keith, in recent years to drive the development of SIX EASY STEPS guidelines for their region, between Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

"When you are leasing country, your economics are very tight, so profitability has been a key driver for me when pushing to have SIX EASY STEPS guidelines for the district," Ben said.

"As an industry we are also aware of the need to improve sustainability and reduce our environmental impact. Developing the guidelines was a chance for us to be proactive, and the upside is that we should be able to save money."

To date, SIX EASY STEPS guidelines are in place for all other regions of the Australian cane industry. Now, thanks to the work of Ben and Josh, with support from SRA, the local Rocky Point draft guidelines are being validated through trials.

This work is occurring through SRA staff Sebastian Garcia-Cuenca (Regional Coordinator for New South Wales and Rocky Point), Gavin Rodman (Adoption Officer), John Panitz (Principal Technician), along with Bernard Schroeder from the University of Southern Queensland and Victor Schwenke with the local productivity services.

CaneConnection caught up with Ben late last year as two validation trials were being fertilised. These trials have followed extensive soil testing and data collection and will compare the growers' traditional rate to the proposed SIX EASY STEPS rate.

These trials, with more in the future, will be a driving factor to help see the local guidelines adopted on farms in the region in years to come.

In Ben's case, he is already learning more about his soils and nutrient management.

"I've been doing soil tests for about 10 years, but it has been generally just one or two samples per year. In 2019 I did seven and through this work I've learnt about the diversity of my soils and the need to understand them better," he said.

"Three years ago I was applying 180 units of N, then in 2018 it was 170, then in 2019 I dropped it to 160 units of N across the board, but with the extra phosphate and potassium that we've identified that I need.

"I've already reduced my costs, and if I can get an increased crop yield, then that will be even better."

Ben is doing other things on his farm to drive a sustainable farming system. In recent years he has made longer rows where possible and converted to dual-row 1.8 metre beds to reduce compaction and time in the paddock. The farms were previously on 1.55m.

Being a co-owner in a harvesting business, he estimates that the wider rows have reduced harvesting costs by between \$1 and \$1.50 per tonne.

"The saving through time in the paddock and reduced cost has been unreal for me," he said. "We are doing everything we can to get our costs down, while also changing practices to make things more sustainable as well.

"One day, if my son decides to farm, the place will be in a better condition than it is today." ■

SIX EASY STEPS®



To see a video of this project in action in the field, hover your smartphone's camera over the QR code.



The SIX EASY STEPS to improved nutrient management

1. Knowing and understanding our soils
2. Understanding and managing nutrient processes and losses
3. Soil testing regularly
4. Adopting soil specific fertiliser recommendations
5. Checking on the adequacy of fertiliser inputs
6. Keeping good records and modifying nutrient inputs when and where necessary

The concept of SIX EASY STEPS means combining a number of possible actions to ensure sustainable nutrient usage on the farm. This combination forms a 'whole system' approach to nutrient management.