➤ ON THE LAND

Rural news

New farming practice that halves fertiliser use could help safeguard Great Barrier Reef

Cane trial yields promising results

WITH last week's release of the Reef 2050 plan, launched by the Federal and Queensland governments, the focus on the reef's health and water quality issues once again turned to sediment and nutrient run-off.

The Reef 2050 document sets ambitious new targets for agricultural producers, with farmers expected to halve their fertiliser run-off by 2018.

In June, Whitsunday and Mackay farmers were identified in the Great Barrier Reef Report Card as leaders in the bid to improve the health of the Great Barrier Reef.

While the majority of our region's farmers already implement best management practices, some have also set their minds to tackling the problems of the future.

At a Project Catalyst cane farm just off the Bruce Hwy to the north of Bloomsbury, a 'skip row' cane trial that holds the possibility of halving grower inputs is entering its fifth year.

Farmers Scott Simpson and Gary Considine planted the trial crop in 2009 after noticing their water furrow rows cut up to twice as much cane as the next row.

"So what we set out to do is to try and create a paddock where every row was a water furrow row, without hindering the way it was harvested," Mr Simpson said.

He said by leaving every second row of cane to lie fallow, they found the cane grew "almost as good in a skip-row situation, in terms of tonnes per hectare, as with every row planted".

In fact, the skip row cane trial has cut 89.2t/ha in the past five years – more than 10t/ha higher than the district average.

LESS IS MORE: Gary Considine, Reef Catchments' Belinda Billing and Scott Simpson at Mr Simpson's farm on Monday afternoon. PHOTO: MATTHEW NEWTON

The results are interesting, to say the least.

Mr Considine said fertilizer and Confidor use had been halved and harvesting costs reduced.

"The harvester travels slower, travels less distance per tonne and uses less fuel per tonne to harvest the cane," he explained.

"So your input costs go down a fair bit."

Next year will be the crucial year for the trial, when the current rows of cane are sprayed out and the fallow rows planted.

If the cane continues to cut at present rates after replanting, it could be a game-changer for the industry.

"So, at the end of the day, you've got a bucket of money at the end of the paddock with the skip row and a bucket of money at the end of the conventional way we've been farming and there's very little difference in the amount of money, but there's half the rows of cane here with half the fertilizer.

"Environmentally, that's got to be a winner," Mr Simpson said.

TRIAL CROP: The 'skip row' cane trial being conducted at Scott Simpson's farm outside of Bloomsbury.

Whitsunday Coast Guardian
First with the news in the Whitsundays

HOW TO CONTACT US

EDITORIAL:
Josh Dutton 0428 750 917
josh.dutton@apn.com.au
Matthew Newton 0428 018 132
matthew.newton@apn.com.au

ADVERTISING:
Sarah Storck-Ogilvie 0400 764 012
sarah.storck@apn.com.au

MANAGING EDITOR:
Leanne Abernethy 4940 2100
leanne.abernethy@whitsundaytimes.com.au

CLASSIFIEDS: 1300 136 181