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Catalyst for better soil

KIMBERLEY VLASIC

A TULLY cane grower has teamed up with the world's biggest soft drink brand to improve soil health on his farm and reduce his reliance on artificial fertilisers.

Ray Zamora is one of 78 Queensland cane growers leading innovation in the sugar industry through Project Catalyst, a partnership between a range of organisations, including The Coca-Cola Foundation.

Next week, the trial results and others around the state will be showcased at the Project Catalyst Forum at the Pullman Cairns International.

Decades of use have stripped Mr Zamora's Euramo cane fields of nutrients and after noticing they were becoming depleted, he started researching bio-fertilisers.

"I knew our soils could be a lot healthier but I don't believe it is sustainable to keep adding more and more artificial fertilisers to compensate for poor soil health," he said.

"I wanted to decrease my costs while maintaining production. I also think the less herbicides and pesticides I have to handle the better."

Working with RegenAG and Terrain Natural Resource

Management, Mr Zamora began trialling a bio-fertiliser

with nitrogen-fixing bacteria and using humates, a naturally occurring material composed of various forms of carbon, when applying urea.

"We are conducting three replicated trials with different levels of nitrogen application," he said.

"After the first year, the results showed that a 33 per cent reduction in fertiliser use made no difference to yield and, while a 75 per cent reduction showed a small drop in yield, it was much less than expected.

"This is an ongoing process and we will continue with these trials to make improvements until we are confident that we have a solution that is

workable and viable in the long term.

"Of course, there's a lot of work involved when you're trialling new practices but what I really like about these bio-fertiliser products is when I'm applying them I know that they're not harmful to me or my family and I'm leaving the planet in better shape than I found it.

"And there's also the knock-on effect of a reduction of any fertiliser into the waterways."

To date, Project Catalyst

growers have improved run-off and drainage water quality of an estimated 150 billion litres.

Trials have focused on im-

proving soil, nutrient, pesticide, irrigation and storm water management across 20,458ha of land in the Burdekin, Mackay Whitsundays and Wet Tropics regions.

"These farmers are driving the adoption of cutting edge practices that will yield improved environmental outcomes," said Terrain NRM chief executive Carole Sweetman. "The Project Catalyst Forum is a fantastic opportunity to bring this network of farmers together to share knowledge and learn about new developments in the industry."

The event will be held on Monday and Tuesday.



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