

Southern Region

Weather

Rain, drought-breaking rain. About mid November, everyone was looking deep into the books to find a way to finance the next irrigation season. Then the harvest finished wet and every other week useful rain fell. It fell on some areas of the southern region more than others, but as far as cane farming goes everyone has had a huge Christmas break.

The extent of the prolonged dry is evident by the surge in wildlife numbers seen while doing a normal day. Hares and butterflies are now as common as I remember in the 1970's. Well that is when Ag-bikes became popular and checking the then new irrigation equipment was just the thing for a teenager on the farm. We soon learned that goggles were a good thing – and a bush hat, so it folded up and went in the hip pocket. Full-face helmets really are a sensible bit of modern technology now.

Planting cane.

New methods are still being tried. Skip rows, now that's a bit out there. We are continually trying for 1,000 percent strike and here's this idea of missing a whole row altogether. These ideas are cost of production reducing possibilities and must be pursued by R&D until it either works or is put behind us. I wonder just how far into the future reducing the cost of production can save an industry. Perhaps prevention of price collapse would be equally useful to all farmers.

Our planting method has changed and I am sure it is for the better. I have previously mentioned time and input reduction but now I can say, risk reduction. Our spell of wonderfully wet weather has given clear evidence of the flat or mound planting having saved the in ground billets from 'drowning'.

The paddock in question is not laser leveled, so there are 100 mm dips around the block. Within these depressions, the 'drowning' of billets is worse toward the center of the depression. From this observation, I can only assume if we had planted using previous method of 150mm deep furrows, the entire planting effort would have been a loss. There 'll be no turning back now.

Harvesting.

Over the years mills have wanted less harvesters and larger daily output from these fewer harvesters. This seems to work in the NSW Northern Rivers. Why then are so many farmers bucking the system and going back to 'cutting their own'. Having been forced into this system many years ago, and having left it, I do wonder why the trend. Cash cost is the answer I hear. I agree, but at the risk of losing productivity with respect to growing a crop.

Geography has large effect. Isolated farms have to get by as best they can, but this is happening in the heartlands. The ever-increasing workload per head in agriculture must be driving robotics developers into a frenzy, to get affordable stuff on the market.

Tech talk.

Arduino is not all that new of a descriptive name, apparently. It's the type of circuitry that drives 3D printers. How fast will this piece of electronics make our machinery so much easier to operate and reliable? This is the BIG problem. Reliable means what? It works perfectly until it stops working. Or does it mean that (as everything mechanical must) that when it breaks down it is economically repairable. I say both, but can ordinary farmers exert any control as to what is dished out by manufacturers?

The rate of change in the knowledge and ability to repair is increasing. Fat lot of good a machine is being faster for say, 2,000 hours then going to scrap due to an unsolvable electronic glitch – well unaffordable glitch, more to the point. This would have been considered by the manufacturers, I am sure, but then maybe this consideration has left out the customer a bit lately. Whether or not it is publicly recognised, a machinery manufacturer has to make a profit.

Future.

Our Region will be up for a Bonsucro type standard to satisfy the 'community'. I have undertaken to enlist for Smartcane BMP. This time around I feel that green groups will be louder again and keeping the farmers in business and satisfyng this lobby will become a bit of a wrangle. And don't forget to Autumn plant early . This will leave time to get to the Next Gen Step Up 2015 conference in Palm Cove. Hope to see you there!

Michael Hetherington
Southern Director