

SMARTCANE BMP SURGE

ACCREDITATIONS ON THE RISE IN MACKAY

By Kim Kleidon

The number of Mackay growers engaging in the Smartcane BMP program has grown exponentially with more than 100 signing up in recent months and many of them already achieving accreditation.

While the Wet Tropics has long been the coalface of industry-led practice change, the recent expansion of Reef regulations has seen an upswing in the number of northern and central region cane growers taking up the challenge to showcase the industry's sustainability credentials.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in Mackay, with another 13 farming

businesses achieving Smartcane BMP accreditation since the start of 2020, bringing the number of accredited farms to 73 - and growing weekly.

Smartcane BMP is a grower-driven, industry-owned, voluntary accreditation system. Accredited growers are recognised as working at or above industry standard in key farming

practices related to productivity, profitability and sustainability.

According to **Audra Allan**, the Smartcane BMP Facilitator for Mackay Area Productivity Services (MAPS), growers need to complete three core modules to obtain accreditation, these cover soil health, irrigation and drainage, along with weeds, pest and disease management.

"Firstly, growers need to register and do a self-assessment on the first three core modules, either online at the Smartcane BMP website or with their productivity officer," Audra said.

"An initial one-on-one meeting is arranged with growers on farm to identify their practices and assess their alignment to industry standards."

Growers are required to provide evidence for a range of activities and facilitators work with them to ensure requirements are met.

Where growers do not yet meet industry standards, or are lacking in evidence, facilitators will assist to collect this information and/or help implement any practice change required.





"If you don't like being dictated to about your farming practices you need to make a move to prove you are using best management practices through the Smartcane BMP Program."

This is something **Stephen Russell** experienced first-hand, after he registered and began keeping records in 2017.

Earlier that year, Stephen was visited by Department of Environment and Science auditors who took copies of all his maps, ledgers and spreadsheets, only to advise him that his records weren't up to scratch.

That was when he asked for help, calling Audra.

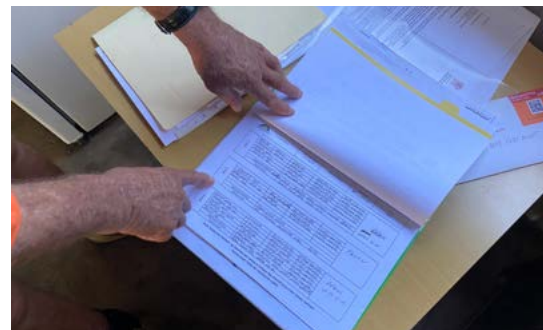
"I thought I was doing a good job with the records, but it was so much simpler the way Audra was doing it, and the system was easy to adopt," Stephen said.

"We did a pest management plan, drainage plan and nutrient plan, as well as ensuring the chemical storage was compliant."

Stephen admits he was a little hesitant when the first Reef regulations were introduced.

"Since green harvest, we don't work as hard as we used to 25 years ago. We don't require the same amount of labour. But when the criticism against farmers

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Pictured: (main) Audra Allen, Smartcane BMP Facilitator Mackay presents Mackay grower Stephen Russell with his Smartcane BMP accreditation certificate, (opposite) Stephen can see the results of Smartcane BMP in his cane growth, (above top) recording chemicals according to tank mix, simplifies paperwork, (above bottom) pest mapping allows Stephen to maintain accurate treatment records.



"My advice to other growers is 'just do it', I'm glad I did. I was one of those fellas that didn't want more paperwork, but now that Audra has provided a new system, all I need to record is which tank mix I use, how much and when."

Pictured: (top left) Harrison Craig helping out on the family farm, (top right) growers Brant and Louise Craig set their sights on the future, (opposite) new varieties of soybean released late last year adopted by Philip Blackburn.

began over run-off to the Reef, and once we saw other people getting involved, we thought 'why not?'"

Once all of Stephen's evidence was collated, Audra arranged a visit from the third party Smartcane BMP auditor, who soon confirmed Stephen could be accredited.

"Growers aren't quite sure how to go about it, or if they're doing it correctly," Audra said.

"No two growers have the same recording methods. It can range from writing on farm maps, to diaries, notebooks, paper-based spreadsheets, electronic spreadsheets or now on the new spatial program Agtrix, available for all growers from MAPS. I have also developed templates to assist growers where necessary."

Many growers believe that government bodies are going to continue imposing further regulations and keep 'moving the goal posts' regardless of numbers moving towards accreditation.

But Audra believes this is an opportunity to fine tune current practices and prove further regulation is unjustified.

"If you don't like being dictated to about your farming practices you need to

make a move to prove you are using best management practices through the Smartcane BMP Program, as this isn't going away," she said.

When it comes to reducing nitrogen, legume fallows are an option strongly encouraged by Smartcane BMP. Not only for their ability to improve soil health through nitrogen fixing, feeding microbes and adding organic carbon, but also for their potential to bring in extra income by taking fallow crops through to harvest or baling for cattle feed.

In the few years since Stephen began planting soybean fallows, cutting fertiliser rates and increasing irrigation efficiency, he has recorded the highest CCS ever for his 66 hectare farm.

He says it's one way he's been able to increase profits.

"My advice to other growers is just do it - I'm glad I did. I was one of those fellas that didn't want more paperwork, but now that Audra has provided a new system, all I need to record is which tank mix I use, how much and when," he said.

Eton grower **Philip Blackburn** first heard about Smartcane BMP through an article in *Australian Canegrower* and was keen to be part of the movement proving



that sugarcane growers are farming responsibly and sustainably.

"We're all here to look after our land, to do the right thing for the land, waterways and not pollute our oceans - most of us love fishing," Philip said.

"It's in our best interest not to be wasting chemicals or fertiliser, but also for those who aren't involved in agriculture to understand that farmers are doing the right thing."

Philip believes his practices were always within regulations but says he has been able to quantify his rates more accurately through records.

He's also utilising cover crops annually, growing new soybean varieties (Kuranda and Mossman) that are performing well.

"We used to grow peanuts until the price of transport to Kingaroy made it unviable. Now with the (high) price of soybean, we grow it out. If something goes wrong, we plough it in and still get the benefits of a legume crop," he said.

Audra is hearing from many accredited growers who are discovering the advantages of adopting Smartcane BMP.

"Smartcane BMP offers an opportunity to fine tune your current practices,

it could even assist with financial decisions," she said.

"Many growers who have achieved accreditation have commented that it wasn't as hard as they thought it was going to be."

Like Philip Blackburn, Brant and Louise Craig first heard about Smartcane BMP through articles in *Australian Canegrower*. Louise attended a self-assessment workshop to understand how their practices measured up under Smartcane BMP standards.

It's a real family business, with Louise sharing many of the responsibilities on farm.

"I work the ground, slash, spray ends. Between the three of us, Brant manages most of the spraying and maintenance, while Harrison (19) jumps in wherever I can't, to work ground and slash as well," Louise said.

Louise says the family never planned on being cane farmers, initially wanting to do the 'hobby farm thing' and raise their children on the land.

"It worked out cheaper at the time to buy a small cane farm than a 10acre hobby farm," she said.

Brant agrees that it wasn't his intention to follow in his father's footsteps, especially because he has a full-time job. "We bought this block so that if it got too much for me, we could fence it and put cattle on it."

Motivated, they say to do the right thing, Smartcane BMP accreditation has made them more aware of how they manage water, chemicals and fertiliser.

"We understand more about our soil, the environment and impact to the Great Barrier Reef. We make sure our headlands are grassed and follow common sense when it comes to preventing anything leaving the farm," Brant said.

The greatest change for Brant is the reduction in fertiliser application and the process they use to water now.

Irrigating with a winch first up, after spraying or fertilising to ensure penetration, the cane isn't flood irrigated until it is well and truly up out of the ground. Louise admits she now has a greater understanding of regulated practices.

"My thoughts initially were to reduce the chemicals altogether, but with Smartcane BMP they want us to spray out the weeds and crops on fallow ground, to reduce disturbance of the soil," she said.

Brant's keen to adopt new practices to make sure his soil is getting what it needs.

"We used a lot more lime this year to sweeten our soil," he said.

Being a relatively small producer inhibits investment in high tech equipment like GPS, but correct record keeping has made a big difference to their business, one they hope will be digital in the near future.

"Audra has held our hand the whole way through this, explaining the process over three years. We're keen to continue improving our soil and management practices, even complete more modules. It's not scary, it's not hard, it's just improving record keeping." ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The Smartcane BMP program is 100% funded by Queensland State Government through the OGBR, providing facilitators, training and accreditation free of charge. This funding is due to cease in 2022.
- In the Mackay region call Indiana Zarb on 0439 557 839, or Audra Allan for assistance with the registration and benchmarking.
- For full list of facilitators in other districts, please visit www.smartcane.com.au

