

"One box we can tick when we talk to people is to say that we produce sugarcane sustainably and we're accredited under Smartcane BMP."

*ROCKY POINT GROWER,
GREG ZIPF.*



Pride and not regulation

DRIVES SMARTCANE BMP IN THE SOUTH

A growing number of sugarcane farmers in Queensland's most southern growing district are working towards Smartcane BMP accreditation, despite being hundreds of kilometres from the Great Barrier Reef and outside of government reef regulations.

Established by industry as a mechanism to drive the productivity, profitability sustainability of sugarcane farms needing to meet water quality requirements in Great Barrier Reef catchments, Smartcane BMP is being embraced by growers much further afield wanting to achieve best practice in farming.

In the Rocky Point district, more than 400km south of the southernmost tip of the Great Barrier Reef, **Greg and Denise Zipf** are part of a growing community of cane growers achieving Smartcane BMP accreditation.

To date, almost half of the district's cane farms are either accredited or working towards accreditation, with growers determined to deliver quality assurance to an increasingly diverse customer base, while helping safeguard the nearby aquatic environment of Moreton Bay.

"Growers in the Rocky Point district have actively sought to be involved in the Smartcane BMP program despite not falling under any of the State Government's reef regulations," Smartcane BMP manager **Kate Gowdie** said.

"More than 70% of the district's cane area is now covered by the program and this figure is growing all the time."

ZIPF FARMING

The sandy soil was still too damp to work, when *Australian Canegrower* visited the Zipf family farm in Woongoolba recently.

In the immediate wake of an unseasonal, though not unexpected 200mm rainfall event, the neighbouring Rocky Point mill was in temporary shutdown as growers in one of Australia's oldest growing districts waited for their blocks to dry out.

Emerging amid the stubble, a smattering of soya bean volunteers added yet more valuable nitrogen to the growing zone via nodules in their root systems. In a region where the soils have been worked for well over a century, replenishing it with nitrogen and other trace elements is not only industry best practice, it's common sense.

"Growing soya beans, putting in a rotational crop, putting in a legume, breaks that monoculture of cane," Greg Zipf explained.

"You're growing better cane as plant crops and first, second and third ratoons as a result of it because you're rebuilding the structure of your soil. It's so important."

The Zipf family started growing soya beans in the early 2000s and the results, at least in terms of boosted yield in the subsequent cane growing cycle, were immediate.

A greater challenge was turning the bean crop into a cash crop, given the cost of equipment needed to harvest beans and get them to market was beyond the reach of individual growers.

The solution was to combine the financial resources of local growers to purchase a combine harvester with a view to targeting the food-grade bean market, which had a hub reasonably close by in Toowoomba.

"Ten farmers in the district actually formed a cooperative and within that cooperative we bought a header and chaser bin and silos and belt augers, and we still have that gear today," Greg said.

"We've just expanded on that equipment a bit, we now have two headers.

"Now that other farmers have seen that we can do the job and have the equipment to do it, we've got more of them growing soya beans."

There are sound business reasons for diversifying into growing beans as a cash crop.

At one level, legume crops meet the best practice objectives in the soil health and nutrition module of Smartcane BMP, while at the same time saving money on granular fertiliser application.

Additionally, diversification of crop production provides an alternate income stream which helps the grower hedge against fluctuations in sugar prices.

"Normally your beans come off in April-May and you'll get paid for those beans 30 days after the end of the month," Greg said.

"So it gives you a little bit of a cash injection just before the start of the cane harvest which can be very handy."

The diversification mantra is one which cane growers in the Rocky Point district have, by necessity, embraced in recent years.

"Rocky Point growers have actively sought to be involved in the program, despite not falling under any reef regulations."

“When you bring Smartcane BMP into your farming philosophy, everything that Smartcane BMP requires you to do and record, you should have been doing it beforehand anyway.”

When the *Australian Canegrower* returned to Woongoolba a few weeks after the rain event, the Zipf family was all hands on deck, harvesting not just sugarcane, but another useful by-product – cane trash – destined for home gardens and produce markets as organic mulch.

As son, **Mitch Zipf** worked the controls of the harvester, and Denise drove alongside in one of two haul-out tractors, Greg followed in their wake in a third tractor equipped with a specially configured hay raking implement.

The modified Lely rake made short work of bundling trash into two mounds on either side of the row, ready for baling. At the same time, a generous cover of trash was raked back over the stool to provide a mulch cover for the re-emerging crop.

“We cut all of our cane green, the whole lot is harvested green then we rake the trash up. We dry it and we bale it in a couple of different forms - in a small bale and a round bale or a larger square bale,” Greg said.

“We always leave material on the ground. We don’t want to rake it clean because we’re a minimum till operation here and we like to leave a bit of cover over the ground.”

Nowadays, the Rocky Point district is almost as well known for its organic sugarcane mulch as its sugar production.

The mulch benefits home gardens in much the same way as trash blanket farming benefits cane crops. It helps smother weeds, retains soil moisture and as it breaks down it boosts the soil profile.

Best of all, there’s a ready-made market right on the doorstep in the urban



corridor between the Gold and Sunshine coasts.

In times of drought, sugarcane mulch is also a useful emergency stock feed for the livestock industry.

“We market to quite a number of landscape yards in the southeast corner as well as directly to the public,” Greg said. “It’s about value adding the product that we currently have in the paddock and it certainly assists when you look at cash flow.

“The cash flow is usually fairly quick because if you bale it, you move it off the farm and you can retail it fairly quickly, which is very handy during the course of the cane season.”

SMARTCANE BMP SEAL OF APPROVAL

Be it sugar, beans or mulch, the Zipf family wants to be certain that customers are getting a stamp of quality assurance for the product they purchase.

It’s a key reason Greg has put his hand up to be accredited as a Smartcane BMP grower.

“One box that we can tick when we talk to people is to say that we currently produce sugarcane in a sustainable manner and we’re accredited to do that under the system of Smartcane BMP,” he said.

It’s also about recognising the importance of the aquatic ecosystem that adjoins the farming community of Rocky Point.

Although it may be hundreds of kilometres beyond the southernmost extension of the Great Barrier Reef, Moreton Bay is home to a rich tapestry of aquatic life, including coral reefs. And, as a place where they spend much of their

leisure time, the Zipf family understands the importance of not harming such a beautiful natural asset.

“We’re right next door to Moreton Bay, which is a huge playground for a lot of people and there’s a lot of marine parks,” Greg said.

Checking his farm drains in the immediate aftermath of the rain event early in the harvest season, Greg made perhaps the most relevant point in relation to where Smartcane BMP fits with his farming philosophy.

What he was required to do to be accredited is largely what he was already doing. Blocks were laser levelled, drains were kept clear, nutrient applied sub-surface and water drained away quickly into the catchment without taking away valuable nutrients.

Sustainable farming practices, as applied by the Zipf family, are common sense.

“When you bring Smartcane BMP into your farming philosophy, everything that Smartcane BMP requires you to do and record, you should have been doing it beforehand anyway,” Greg said.

“If you want to run a smooth and well-run operation, you should have been doing all those things previously.

“All Smartcane BMP wants you to do is record and show what you’ve done, when you’ve done it.

“That’s my philosophy, it’s very little extra work to meet the requirements of Smartcane BMP.” ■

Pictured: (right) L-R: Wayne Jurd, Denise Zipf, Mitch Zipf, Greg Zipf.

