

TURNING THE TIDE ON CLEAN SEED UPTAKE

By Jessica Turchet

Plane Creek Smartcane BMP Facilitator



Over several years, Plane Creek Productivity Services (PCPSL) has noticed a downturn in the use of clean seed sources from the region's three whole stick distribution plots.

While many attempts had been made to make clean seed more accessible for growers, all efforts to date had failed to produce the desired results.

Growers acknowledged that the time, labour, and equipment involved in cutting, carting, planting, and multiplying out from whole sticks was a major hinderance to the use of clean seed. Billet distribution had been discussed, but the logistics made it problematic.

With a region that is as geographically elongated and disconnected as Plane Creek, and few growers able to host this scale of operation on their farms, there was no ideal location for a clean seed billet plot.

In 2020, this downward trend landed Plane Creek last among all regions in terms of clean seed use as a proportion of mill area, with approximately 15 tonnes of clean cane going out across the area. This was a title that PCPSL manager **Damian Baxter** was keen to improve on.

"There are three very good reasons why Plane Creek needs a clean seed billet plot," Damian said. "The first reason is to maintain maximum productivity. Clean seed cane is free from sugarcane diseases such as Chlorotic Streak, Leaf

Scald and RSD, to name a few. These diseases alone have the potential for yield losses of up to 40% or more of the infected cane. By planting cane that is free from the risk of disease you are giving your crop the best start.

"Secondly, RSD is arguably one of our biggest threats in Plane Creek. Although it hasn't been detected in the Plane Creek Mill area for several years, it is right on our doorstep and increasingly impacting the mill areas to the north.

"Thirdly, if ever RSD or any other sugarcane disease made its way into the Plane Creek mill area, then a clean seed billet plot is going to go a long way to providing a path to a speedy recovery."

After much planning the billet plot became a reality this year, thanks to the generous support of Koumala grower **Neil Walpole**, who agreed to host the plot on his farm.

Neil assisted PCPSL to plant approximately 1 hectare each of the three major commercial varieties used in Plane Creek - Q208, Q183, Q240 - from clean seed on his farm.

This cane was two years from hot water treatment when planted, thanks to collaboration between PCPSL and the

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The Koumala plot, pictured above, boasts a healthy crop of clean seed Q208, Q240, & Q183.

Mackay Area Productivity Services, who provided the clean plant material.

Neil, who has been a Smartcane BMP accredited farmer of four years, maintains the plot to the same high standards he sets for the rest of his farm, producing a healthy crop of each variety for Plane Creek growers to utilise.

"In my thinking, you need volume in some of your planting, and the other problem is most planting these days is done with a billet planter," Neil said.

"In order to plant with a stick you have to have the equipment, but most farmers have moved past that and so the equipment is gone."

"The population of farmers is getting quite elderly, so you'd prefer not to do these things manually anymore," Neil joked.

"We only planted the three varieties, because most of the other varieties were closer to coming from a clean source than the older varieties, which people had just propagated from their original supply.

"We all realise that we were a long way away from hot water treated, and that is paramount to farm success, having a clean cane source."

When asked why he offered to host the plot Neil was frank.

"There was no problem with letting PCPSL use the block, it was there, it was available, and I just thought that's what you do.

"It was a requirement and a desire of other people around the area, and if we got the problems sorted out this year then it might become more prevalent.

"Time saved is just paramount, it just makes it so easy for the people in the area. I just think it's a good idea".

If there was one thing they could have done better, it would have been to utilise the weigh truck from SRA to distribute the cane further, but that wasn't possible in the end, Neil said.

"If you had that, the system would have been nearly perfect, and you could expand your horizons just a little bit further. If someone from further away could have gotten 4 tonnes to plant out,

then he and his neighbours are set for years, so that was disappointing."

PCPSL manager Damian Baxter was far from disappointed with the results.

"The results have been fantastic, with approximately 183 tonnes of disease-free plant material distributed this year. When looking back on the 15 tonnes taken last year, it really is encouraging".

Looking forward, PCPSL are keen to continue with a diversified approach to clean seed distribution and re-establish clean seed focus groups to engage more growers in the planning.

The challenge now is to find more hosts like Neil, so that growers in the north and south can boost their farm's resilience in bulk as well.

Neil is also encouraging others to put their hand up.

"If my harvester hadn't broken down, it would have been a glorious experience. It doesn't take long to go and fill up someone's bins, it doesn't take much," he said.

Records of Clean Seed purchase and/or Hot Water Treatment are a requirement of Smartcane BMP accreditation. ■

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Pictured: Q240 was eagerly taken up by Plane Creek growers

