



# Working together to maximise returns for grower, miller, and contractor

A collaborative approach between contractor and grower is delivering results for Ian Ghidella and his harvesting group.

BY BRAD PFEFFER



## **Tully harvesting contractor Ian Ghidella reckons one of the best components of his harvester is one of the most simple.**

It's not its power, it's not its colour, and it's not anything to do with the range of improvements he has made to optimising the machine.

It's the second seat inside the cab.

That seat gives him the opportunity to encourage growers to sit with him as he is cutting their blocks and, together, they can talk about the challenges that might be in a particular block, and how they can achieve the best job possible.

This collaboration is typical of his philosophy for optimising the harvest and working with his growers, and others, to get the best results that are achievable.

"I think it's all about having the right attitude," Ian told CaneConnection as he was servicing and painting gear leading up to this year's crush. "I have nothing to hide, and I encourage growers to sit in the cab with me and together we focus on results at the end of the season and target the bonus payments for quality from Tully Sugar.

"Anyone can have a bad day or miss a stool of cane somewhere – it's the results at the end of the season and future ratoons that matter."

He also said that the online tool developed by Norris ECT, called SCHLOT (sugarcane harvest logistics optimisation tool), allows him to back up his own experience with research data.

He also participated in trials with SRA in 2017 to assess losses with the in-field sucrose loss measurement system.

"After doing the trials and using the SCHLOT calculator, which I have saved on my phone, it helps me continue to keep losses to a minimum and to try and get as much possible from the block for the farmer, for myself, and for the miller," he said.

"Normally, I will go in and cut a few rows first and then I'll go into the calculator and ask it 'what is the optimum cutting for a block of Q208(b) that's a bit sprawly, on an overcast day?'

"All these things are estimated in SCHLOT in relation to groundspeed, pour rate, fan speed, and it calculates the losses, and then I've got a useful guide as to how I'm going."

He knows that some further real-world adjustment may be required, but sees SCHLOT as a valuable guide

Ian's business, Mission Harvesting, cut 57,000 tonnes last year and while he admits that the size of the contract gives him a little more leeway to do a better job, he still feels that he could achieve optimum results even with a bigger contract of, say, 70-80,000 tonnes.

"There are a lot of other variables like paddock size, row length, wet weather, and shifting between farms, and all of this comes in to play."

As demonstration of the success of his work, Ian was awarded the 2017 cane harvesting award from the Tully Mill, and he prides himself on providing consistent results year-to-year since the business began in 2014.

Ian has made a number of modifications over the years to achieve a better cut, quality billets, and put less dirt through the machine. This year this has included shark fin rollers to ensure the cane is evenly spread.

After a lifetime in sugarcane, he said that harvest optimisation is about continued learning and collaboration.

"There is a need for a greater understanding of the difference between just driving a harvester and learning how to operate one properly to maximise production. This is a learning curve for harvester contractors and farmers working together for the same outcome: a profitable living."

Ian's group was one of 47 trials that were conducted in 2017 in green-cane areas, with a further 60 trials planned in 2018 right across the industry.

"If anyone wants to know more I'd encourage them to contact SRA and get involved, as it is really valuable to see the different harvester settings tested and compare the aggressive with normal with low loss," Ian said.

Regional results were presented at recent harvesting forums across the industry, while each group has had further discussions and meetings with SRA.

The project is also looking at the economics of harvesting, including contracting, through the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

"In the forty-three trials along the QLD coast, we looked at the revenue benefits in the different regions from using BMP settings. We found that industry revenue across all the green cane areas increased by an average of \$3 per tonne. There were variations in revenue, that can be attributed to the particular

region, contractor and the block being harvested," said DAF Senior Agricultural Economist Matt Thompson.

"The Department is developing a custom spreadsheet tool that calculates the labour, fuel, maintenance, depreciation, interest and overhead costs at particular harvester ground speed and fan settings. So far, six harvesting contractors have provided information to measure their changes in harvesting costs at the trial sites and more are expected to join the project. The work is ongoing and additional data will be collected in the 2018 harvest season to further inform the economic findings." ■

**"...it's the results at the end of the season and future ratoons that matter."**



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Agriculture**  
**and Water Resources**

*(Over page) Tully harvesting contractor Ian Ghidella worked with SRA on harvest loss demonstration trials in 2017.*

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**This work is one element of a much larger project called Enhancing the sugar industry value chain, which is funded by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources and SRA as part of the Rural R&D for Profit Program.**