Dry January

There is a practice, taken up by some who have overindulged at Christmas time, of taking a Dry January, a period of abstinence from alcohol or rich food to allow the body to recover. Mother Nature must have really tied one on over the holiday period as her period of abstinence from rain across January was record breaking. We recorded just 1.6 mm at Harwood for the month, the driest January since at least 1915. The previous record over the same period was 8.4 mm in 1966. Our regular January monthly average is 144 mm. February has brought only minimal relief to date with just short of 50 mm recorded giving us a combined total of 50.8 mm for the first two months of the year. That make’s it the second driest start to the year after 1932 when 45 mm were recorded (25.7 mm in Jan and 19.3 in Feb). Consider that the combined average for January and February is 306 mm or 23.5% of the average annual total. That suggests the crop has so far missed about 250mm compared to what it would receive ion average.

Crops, particularly those on shallow hill soils and sandy ridges & patches suffering badly. For some plants the moisture deficiency is that great that parts of the crop have crossed beyond the Permanent Wilting Point, a level of moisture so low that the plant will be unable to recover its turgidity and loses the moisture stored in its own cells. Once this point is reached it will no longer be able to recover when rain does eventually come. Some growers have reported losing lots of side shoots and suckers. This may be particularly the case in areas that experienced the frosts in the winter. The plant had side shoots but the dry hot weather and then the heavy winds associated with Cyclone Oma saw the plant drop them. It’s been a tough start and the cane has stood still for much of the growing season but, if we do get some rain there are some prospects for improvement.

Soy Boys

Given the desperate need for rain we are surprised by the way some soybean crops are hanging on. One particular crop on Paul Richardson’s still looks lush and green and the key difference in this particular case was mill mud. The crop of Hayman on the right in the adjoining photo was planted after an application of mill mud. The adjoining paddock (on the left in the photo) was also planted with Hayman on the same day, 24th November, but had no mill mud applied. I got Mark to stand in the two crops to give some perspective. In the mud applied field the crop has already grown past Mark’s waist but where no mud was applied its barely past his knees. The measurements might be slightly different on someone of ordinary height but the end result is much the same. We see the primary benefit of the mill mud being its additional moisture holding capacity in this particularly dry year but additional N, P, K and lime will have also played some part. Sometimes excess of nitrogen in mill mud can make the plant a bit lazy in terms of nitrogen fixation but we also looked at the root nodules and couldn’t pick any difference.

Get the Latest Info at the Ag Services/SRA Info Day

An information day to update growers on the current research projects being undertaken by SRA will be held on 26th March at Harwood Hall from 9am. We will also provide an update of the Ag Services work plan and finances. A bus will be organized from Condong and pick up at Broadwater if there are sufficient numbers of growers wishing to attend.

Please call Alister ASAP to register your place as we need to know numbers for catering purposes. More information of the topics and speakers for the day are attached.
An update on SRA activities

This is a short summary from Sebastien on SRA’s adoption activities since mid-last year. The purpose of the SRA Industry Adoption Strategy is to support the growth of the sugar industry through application of technology and practices that lead to an increasing cane supply. Each region formed working groups to discuss and develop their own plans. In our case the NSW Ag Advisory Committee and Rocky Point Canegrowers/mill reps got together to form an advisory committee. The group identified what the research and practice improvement needs were, and the most effective means of doing it.

Each regional group also nominated two people to represent the region on the industry wide adoption committee. This industry committee will co-ordinate the plans and try to obtain funding to commission new projects. Wayne Rodgers and Rick Beattie will represent NSW on this committee. Sebastien Garcia-Cuenca will look after the admin and engage with the existing groups. Since July 2018 Sebastien prepared a discussion paper and the committee has agreed on 3 top priorities, improved farming systems, nutrient management and better cane varieties. The next step has been to develop the plans to go to the industry advisory committee. This group meets in March so by July some projects on farming systems, nutrients and varieties should commence.

In parallel to the above, SRA has been co-funding and delivering with Ag Services regional projects that include:

- A nematode survey on 45 farms where 15 blocks per mill area have been sampled and analysed to assess the distribution and potential impact of nematode species in different soil types. The results of these will be discussed at the shed meetings.
- A winter fallow demonstration trial at the Sunshine Sugar corporate farm to trial different winter and multi-species crops. These results will also be discussed at the shed meetings.
- Eight harvesting trials between NSW and Rocky Point were conducted to provide practical insight and economic data on harvesting practices; Results have been presented to the participating groups and an overall summary will be presented at the Info Day on 26 March.

Please contact Sebastien Garcia-Cuenca on 0421 349 995 or s.garcia-cuenca@sugarresearch.com.au with any queries, comments or if you require more details on any of the above topics.

Bonnie Sugar

The annual Bonsucro audit will take place during late May. We’ll notify those lucky enough to be selected as soon as we can and follow that up with a visit to explain what’s required. We will work through the process with you and prepare most of the information. To maintain our Bonsucro accreditation and allow the mills sugar to be sold as Bonsucro certified we need to audit six forms each year. There is nothing to fear from the process, it’s not as tough as it sounds and I think the process can be useful in reviewing your production system and management processes. By the way, the Scottish word “bonnie” as in Bonnie Scotland is derived from the French word bonne, which means good. Hence Bonsucro means good sugar. And speaking of bonnie, take a look at this couple of bonnie lads on the right hand side. Graham and John a well into their preparations for the Maclean Highland Gathering which will be held on 19/20 April this year.

Getting the Chop

The results of SRA’s trials of the EHS choppers with the Lower Richmond and Woodburn groups last season were impressive. Less loss, more sugar per hectare. All positives for farmers, the harvesting co-op and the mill. Chris’s letter explains the subsidy arrangements that are being offered for the EHS choppers. This makes good sense given the crop size this year. There’s no point in growing it then losing it at the last minute. If you’d like any more information on the trials please call.

We’ll pay for you to leave

Ag Services has funds to help support farmers to go to the sugar conference in Toowoomba which is on 30 April to 3 May 2019. While the location is unique in sugar industry terms it makes it a lot closer for us to attend, participate and learn from some of the latest research available. If you are interested please contact Sebastien, 0421 349 995.

Cheers from Alister & Mark

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