QSL to pay out biggest advance

THIS year’s blockbuster advance payment by principal sugar marketer Queensland Sugar Ltd (QSL) of $265 a tonne for IPS sugar (international polarity scale) means that coastal sugar communities will experience unprecedented cash flows early in the season. The advance payment traditionally covers costs of inputs already outlaid to establish the crop and prepare it for harvest, including fertiliser, chemicals, irrigation, machinery and labour. A low advance rate and meagre, slow progressive payments throughout the season invariably erode growers’ finances and the economic vitality of country towns. Despite a recent decline in global sugar prices, income prospects for growers are sound. The 2010 advance is 6pc up on last year and represents 60pc of forecast final price. It is the highest advance rate QSL has ever paid, reflecting strong global sugar prices and exchange rates. QSL handles more than 90pc of Australia’s sugar exports. QSL managing director and CEO Neil Taylor said the raw sugar supply agreements QSL had with eight Queensland sugar millers brought value, transparency and certainty to the industry. This was especially important in times of market volatility and uncertainty. Futures prices for 2010 season have fluctuated by 40pc, ranging from US25c/lb to US15c/lb. Recently the entire QSL board visited the Herbert region for the first time. Chairman Alan Winney told growers at Ingham that prices should be favourable for the next five years if current sugar shortages continued and weather was favourable.

Peanut, cane rotation

TRIALS by a farmer group indicate more work is needed if peanuts are to be grown in a minimum/zero till rotation system with cane on a wide scale in the Wide Bay region. Results presented to the AS SST conference in Bundaberg show that further studies are needed to identify and overcome productivity constraints. Future trials should assess the effect of trash blanketing under various tillage regimes, the effectiveness of deep ripping at planting in alleviating compaction, the impact of GPS guidance and the effect of different weed control strategies and machinery modifications. The Sustainable Sugar and Peanut Agriculture grower group led by Don Haipin considers the system can help maintain productivity and profitability and improve water quality.

Cow Candy’s good outlook

BIOCANE Ltd, the embryonic Nambour-based producer of high energy stockfeed products from sugarcane, expects to process 30,000 tonnes of cane this season. The crop should produce 10,000 tonnes of Cow Candy, enough to launch the animal fodder onto South Korean and Japanese markets and secure firm orders for next year. Major shareholders associated with China’s Yinmore Sugar will loan another $712,000 (convertible to equity) to get the plant up and running. Last month it was mothballed briefly while the company pursued further equity funding. Biocane will also seek to raise $300,000 for working capital from 240 existing Australian shareholders and supporters, many of whom are cane growers. Limited plant capacity means that some cane will again go to Maryborough Mill. Revenue from these sources plus clean paddocks for next year’s crop augur well for industry recovery. The factory should begin processing cane in July/August. An $80,000 State Government grant with Sugar Research Institute assistance will facilitate a review of technical and budgetary aspects. Following retirement of GM Scott Grimley, Dr Druce Batstone, inventor of the Biocane drying process, will oversee commissioning. Yinmore’s Chunqing Liu will be deputy general manager with Suming Yuan remaining as chairman. Deputy chair John Rivett, a Noosa barrister, has revealed that Yinmore Sugar is partly owned by Bright Foods, the body targeting CSR’s sugar milling assets. Bright Foods executives led by vice president Ge Junjie recently met industry leaders during a low-profile industry inspection.

Best practice at Cairns

WITH his farm located under Cairns airport’s flight path and hemmed in by busy roads, a creek and housing estates, Bill Smith is feeling the urban squeeze. However, best practice management should ensure it remains a productive, sustainable part of FNQ’s sugar future. He will keep growing cane while the local industry remains viable, using a farming system based on controlled traffic, wide rows, mounded planting, legume break crops and minimum tillage. The farm cannot be developed...
for residential use as it is flood prone. Best practice is essential for growers operating so close to an expanding city environment because it contributes to profitability and minimises farming’s effect on the environment. Bill aims to farm responsibly, takes advantage of training workshops, information briefings and refresher courses and strives to ensure his farming skills and accreditations are current. He also tries to stay abreast of management recommendations and industry developments. Soils range from sand to sandy loams to mangrove mud (the farm is just 1 km from the coastline and adjoins natural wetlands), hence good mangrove management is crucial. He minimises activities such as spraying that may prompt complaints from urban neighbours. Cane is burnt only when essential e.g. heavy weed infestations. Bill operates San Remo Farming Co. as a one-man operation for himself and sisters Barbara Russell and Christine Forrester. The business got its name from nearby Holloway’s Beach, which was once called San Remo Beach. In addition to growing 64ha of cane, he has a Brahman cattle stud at Kuranda. His grandfather David Smart took up cane farming after migrating from Scotland in 1908. Bill’s mother and uncle bought the present farm in 1954 and Bill returned home after completing an agricultural course and mechanical apprenticeship.

In recent years, wallabies have become a major pest in the Barron Delta, eating plant cane to the ground and digging up billets. Last year they destroyed about 20pc of the crop, reducing the expected harvest from 5000t to 4000t. Limited numbers can be culled under a permit system. Motorcycle riders also cause damage including erosion, but a bigger threat is potential loss of the tramway linking the area to Mulgrave Mill 25km away.

In 2006, Bill and neighbouring grower John Westaway were awarded a Water Quality Incentives Scheme grant aimed at minimising sources of contaminants entering the Barrier Reef lagoon. This partly funded construction of a zonal tillage implement, designed by Ken Clarke and developed by Mulgrave Landcare, only works the ground where cane is grown. Bill is confident that minimal amounts of sediment, fertiliser and chemicals leave his farm as a result of his practices which are designed to reduce costs and improve productivity. Minimising outgoings by reducing fertiliser and chemical usage also protects the environment. A five-year program including GPS guidance and controlled traffic will help minimise future compaction and erosion and give significant savings in fuel, time and wear and tear.

Improvements to farming practices were fast tracked as a result of Reef Rescue funding which helped install GPS auto steer on his JD 7610 tractor. He began converting from 1.6m to 1.8m row spacing and using minimum till mound planting, courtesy of contractors Mark Savina and Mick Andrejcic. Last year they planted 20ha of Bill’s fallow with their newly acquired Mizzi mound billet planter. Once the whole farm is under 1.8m rows the strategy will be to spray out cane for falling with glyphosate; zero tillage with direct drill cowpea/legume crops, spraying out the legume crop to maximise nutrient input from the crop, and cultivation with the zonal tillage implement to prepare for planting. The cane will be planted direct into the legume residue which enables savings in fuel, time and fertilisers. Only two passes with the zonal tillage implement will be needed instead of two rippings, a discing, a grubbing and a conventional rotary hoeing (season dependent). This approach provides a win-win situation for cane production and the environment.

**End of an era?**

**TIME** is running out for anyone who hasn’t seen old-style hand cane cutting and loading in the flesh. Paul and Shirley Donnelly, who’ve run the Australian Hand Cane Cutting Championships on their Dalbeg farm since 1999, have listed the farm for sale. If it sells, the event will need a new home and that could prove elusive. This year’s championship on June 27 will be 10 weeks earlier than last year when Paul’s brother Peter Donnelly of Mackay retained his title in blistering heat. Paul, 65, expects to have a good straight crop of late plant Q183 to cut. He will continue his contract harvesting business for another three years, having bought a new machine for this season to replace the old one that did 15,000 hours. For details on the event including local camping facilities call the Donnellys on (07) 4784 0147.

**Festival’s new touch**

AN auction of foot and mouth painter John E Smith’s The Cutty Sark will feature at Mackay’s sugar festival on May 18. Proceeds will benefit local disabled folk via a respite centre. John became a quadriplegic following a horse riding accident.

**Excessive N a problem**

New University of Queensland research has shown that nitrous oxide (N2O) is emitted from sugar cane soil early in the growing season. A UQ team working with the Department of Environment and Resource Management, analysed greenhouse gas emissions from a cane farm south of Brisbane and found N2O emissions from soil were considerable when higher-than-recommended N fertiliser was applied and when soil became waterlogged during flood irrigation. Nitrous oxide is rated with global-warming potential 300 times higher than CO2. It originates from N stored in the soil. N2O is blamed for 10 pc of global warming and N fertilisers in agriculture contribute to much of this, says Dr Susanne Schmidt. She said growers who applied less N, reduced soluble N in soil (the precursor for N2O) and prevented water logging would cut emissions.
Mareeba grower Barry Marti with the solar powered control station for the two EnviroSCAN units he is using in his overhead irrigated cane as part of a BSES drying-off trial. Withholding water is common practice on the Tablelands to drive up sugar content prior to harvesting. Participation in the trial has convinced him not to rely on personal judgement as to when cane needs to be watered to avoid moisture stress. The trial showed him that soil up to a metre below the surface was sometimes very dry when inspection of the crop and recent rainfall experience suggested otherwise. He now considers that probes are essential tools for successful irrigation farming. Barry and wife Lynette have grown cane since the late 1990s on a 207ha farm 40km from the sugar mill at Arriga. The farm is the most easterly from the mill. Because of declining economic viability of cane in recent years the Martis decided to lease part of the farm to Dole Corporation for bananas.

Cairns cane grower Bill Smith is using industry best practice management to ensure that he can continue to farm profitably and sustainably on Cairns' doorstep.