

MEDIA RELEASE

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Reliability, adaptability sweetens the deal for North Queensland sugarcane farmers

Proserpine sugarcane farmer and contractor Peter Miotto is preparing for another busy harvest, and one that even a fierce tropical cyclone only two months ago couldn't prevent.

Cyclone Debbie roared across the Queensland coast on March 28, just north of Proserpine at Airlie Beach, and while her ferocity exacted a devastating toll on the state's agricultural resources, cane growers have carried on. The national crop for the 2017 season was recently estimated at just under 34 million tonnes¹, although understandably down on last year as a result of cyclone damage and ongoing drought in the southern cane region of Queensland.

Peter and wife Judy farm about 200ha just north of Proserpine. They also run a successful contracting business with a Case IH Austoft 8800 harvester, which they purchased 12 months ago in time for the 2016 crush.

Last year, Peter says the Austoft cut about 100,000 tonnes of cane – across about 1200ha – but thanks to Debbie, and another big rain event in May, it will be a slightly different story this season.

"There's been a fair bit of damage, a lot of broken cane, snapped cane, that sort of thing," Peter said. "We'll be at least 20 per cent down (in this area) on last year because of the cyclone, and the sugar content will be affected a bit, too."

Peter said for the contracting business, it would be a fairly slow season because of flattened cane and remnants of the cyclone, such as bits of tin and other rubbish, littering paddocks.

But he knows he's got the best equipment for the challenging four-plus months ahead, saying he had used Case IH machinery for the past 30 years – as long as he's run the contracting business – and kept buying it for some very important reasons.

"I like the product, simple as that," Peter said. "They're reliable, we've never had any big dramas with them."

The Miotto's change over their Austoft harvester every three to four years, and also have several Case IH tractors on the property, including a 180 Puma and two 155 Pumas.

For a business that goes seven days a week in peak time, reliability is key, but in the case of a harvester it's also got to be accommodating for the people behind the controls, who work six days out of eight and can be in the machine for up to 12 hours at a time.

"They are very comfortable and they need to be when the drivers are sitting in there all day," Peter said, referring to son Steven and employee Joel O'Brien.

About 180km up the road from the Miotto's at Ayr, Malcolm Searle and wife Idoya have just welcomed the contractors onto their two cane farms.

The Searles – whose sons Graham and Jeffrey work alongside them, with another son Adrian assisting on a part-time basis – also run about 1700 head of Brahman cattle on two other properties, something that sets them apart from many other producers in the sugar industry.

¹ Australian Sugar Milling Council estimates

Most of the cattle are sold and processed in Mackay but the Searles also take advantage of Australia's live export arrangements, sending cattle to Townsville from where they are then shipped to Vietnam.

Aside from the cane they grow and raising cattle, the family also sows just over 12ha of corn a season for livestock feed, and are assisted across this range of on-farm tasks by their small fleet of Case IH tractors.

Three Puma tractors – a 195, 165 and 125 – work alongside a Case IH 85hp JXU across the two properties, assisting with the sugarcane that yields on average 18,000 tonnes annually, cattle work, the corn crop, hay-making activities and slashing.

Malcolm said they'd used Case IH equipment for just on 10 years and found the company's tractor models well suited to the wide range of tasks demanded by a unique mixed farming enterprise like theirs.

"They've been really good for us, and are always reliable," Malcolm said. "They do what we need them to do and have proved to be very versatile and good to drive. All up they probably do about 500 hours each a year."

"We also find the service great and help is there if you need it."

The Miotto's, whose local dealer is McDonald Murphy at Proserpine, and the Searles, who rely on Ayr-based dealer Ag North, both rate the level of service from the businesses as high and a big factor in them staying loyal to the brand for so many years.

Both families are making final preparations for the 2017 crush, with crushing operations well underway in some regions.

Malcolm's local mill kicked up its operations earlier this month, while Peter said the mill at Proserpine had a July 4 starting date, with both regions' crushing seasons delayed due to Cyclone Debbie and the amount of rain that had fallen in May.

But, both growers, who are third generation North Queensland cane farmers, know how fickle Mother Nature can be and the importance of taking the good seasons with the not-so-good.

"It's all part of what we do, and when we can't rely on the weather, being able to rely on the machinery we use is that much more important," Peter said.

To find out more about the Case IH range of harvesters and tractors see your local Case IH dealer or visit the Case IH website at www.caseih.com.

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