



The Australian Cane Farms billboard provides Bruce Highway travellers a welcome to the Burdekin.



Silos visible from the highway ensure the farm is noticed by passers-by.



Farm Hand Cornel Du Blessis – "Duppie" - programs the irrigation schedule in the office.



Australian Cane Farms General Manager Farming Operations Ryan Matthews is pleased with the benefits of automated irrigation.

AUTOMATED IRRIGATION SAVING TIME AND MONEY

One of the Burdekin's large corporate growers has begun the process of automating their irrigation, with support from the Burdekin Irrigation Project.

Australian Cane Farms is counting the benefits in improved productivity and reduced costs and water use, while also achieving improved environmental outcomes.

Since 2006, Australian Cane Farms has grown from farming a couple of hundred hectares to more than 4000.

Their property at Horseshoe Lagoon, north of Brandon, is prominent on the Bruce Highway - its billboard signage welcomes passers-by to the Burdekin, while its towering silos are standout features among fields of sugarcane.

General Manager Farming Operations Ryan Matthews said the property was a natural choice as the starting point for the company's switch to automated irrigation.

"We want to be seen as an industry player to be working to the best of our ability to have a good environmental footprint, because there's a lot of pressure on this industry," he said.

"We want to make sure that when people drive up and down the Bruce Highway and they look at our farm before they cross the creek, they say, 'you know there's very minimal water running off into a natural waterway'."

Ryan said automating irrigation on the 320-hectare farm made good business sense.

"It's basically to try and utilise our farm hands so we're getting value for time and doing other jobs," Ryan said.

"Just running around our properties, turning on taps, turning pumps on, turning pumps off, is a time-consuming exercise," Ryan said.

"Each individual is looking after 400 hectares by themselves, so they spend a lot of time driving around. This is about simplifying that."

Not one for computers, Farm Hand Cornel Du Blessis – affectionately known as Duppie - admits he was daunted when introduced to the computerised technology. But his confidence has grown rapidly.

"Now I find it's a stroll in the park. It is so straightforward, and you rely on your equipment. It has been set up and it will switch on and switch off when it's supposed to," Duppie said.

"We're saving water, saving money and time – that's the big thing.

"You've got peace of mind that everything is going to happen the way it should. It's made my life so much easier, it's phenomenal. I love it."

Two months into using the automated system, Duppie is looking to adopt more of the automated features available.

"There are so many functions that I can use to make my life even better.

"For instance, we have an end-row sensor that you can put in the row and as soon as the water touches that it'll open the next set. I'm not there yet but I'll get there.

Ryan said the set-up process was simple, thanks to support received through the Burdekin Irrigation Project.

The project is supporting lower Burdekin sugarcane farmers to transition to more efficient irrigation systems and practices to help reduce on-farm irrigation expenses, run-off and deep drainage losses.

Farmers receive one-on-one support to improve systems, identify opportunities to save on energy and irrigation costs, and investigate potential water-use efficiencies.

"We found it quite easy. Initially you just put in your expression of interest, and send it back to SRA," Ryan said.

Participants can choose to work with one of three delivery partners - AgriTech Solutions, Burdekin Productivity Services or Farmacist.

"Once your application is ticked off, they touch base and work with you. They design the system based on how you want it to work, and what result you want to achieve.

"We're really time poor and it's been a simple process."

Like Duppie, Ryan is pleased with the results which enable the business to maximise irrigation, while reducing water use and losses from flooding or run-off.

"We can have the system change irrigation sets at midnight or two o'clock in the morning. In the past we had timers on pumps, which turns off the pumps, but that's six hours of irrigation time we're losing and it adds complexity to Sunwater as well, in trying to manage their channel heights.

"Having our pumps run 24 hours a day and having irrigation sets turn themselves on and off automatically, makes it easy for Sunwater to maintain a channel height that delivers the flow rate that we desire.

"It also maximises our irrigation efficiency, so we don't lose six hours of pumping time. On this property we pick up three or four days in just not having the pump stopped. It also means I don't have to get one of my farmhands to wake up at midnight or two o'clock in the morning to change irrigation sets to get the same result."



The Burdekin Irrigation Project is funded by the partnership between the Australian Government's Reef Trust and the Great Barrier Reef Foundation with collaboration between Sugar Research Australia, Farmacist, AgriTech Solutions, Burdekin Productivity Services, Burdekin Bowen Integrated Floodplain Management Advisory Committee, James Cook University, the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and NQ Dry Tropics.