



Butts in the Burdekin Dry Tropics

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Kevin Mann joins BDTNRM Board

By Terry Butts

The Townsville based Burdekin Dry Tropics Natural Resource Management recently appointed high profile Home Hill canegrower Kevin Mann to its eleven-member board. It is an interesting appointment and comes at a time when scientists and land users are sometimes (if not often) in disagreement about modern land management techniques.

“They don’t want to listen to us,” say some (not all) of the scientists.

“They don’t understand us,” is the counter claim by farmers.

And to suggest that the relationship is harmonious would be a case of stretching the bow... just a tad. But its not an impossible situation says Kevin Mann who is just the right bloke to build that bridge of understanding.

After 16 years with Queensland Canegrowers, and the past six as chairman of Inkerman Canegrowers, Kevin Mann has seen change in an industry that has survived a lot of serious challenges both on the domestic and overseas front. Of fluctuating land and sugar prices, quite apart from the cyclones, droughts and other factors that have impacted and tested the resilience of our cane cockies.

Yet, inexorably in the 30 years he has been a farmer, the cane growing area of the Burdekin has actually doubled. There are several reasons, least of which involves the critical use and management of water and that is an area where Kevin Mann has state wide, and national, recognition.

If qualifications mean anything Kevin is just the man (pardon the pun) for BDTNRM, a community group that is steadily earning a worthy reputation, around the north particularly for its efforts to improve the management of natural resources within the region and more importantly for the community.

Kevin Mann was born on the family cane farm at Home Hill, and apart from a six year stint at school teaching and a working holiday in the UK back in the late 1970s, he’s been there ever since. In partnership with his brother David, they have been working, driving, planting, harvesting, irrigating and performing all the other hand blistering chores that are part of the daily ritual for the man on the land.

Yet he still found time for board meetings, which he obviously took very seriously. So serious was his concern for water management and salinity he once took off for Swan Hill in Victoria to witness first hand how the farmers handled the problems of the Murray Darling. He came back and implemented what is termed conjunctive use of water, a method he had learner from the Victorians, and encouraged his neighbours and colleagues to do the same. It is basically blending one third bore water with river water, recycling it, and more importantly controlling its flow and distribution.

Kevin Mann is known for his determination and is very much hands on. In his own words “different” and he makes no apology for that. Like the time he was in London in 1979 working on a building site, it was winter- the worst in 20 years- public transport was halted so he walked the five miles to work in knee deep snow.

“They called me the mad Aussie, I was the only one to turn up.”

That year on the continent was 12 months of his life he still cherishes. The trip came after six years of teaching and he was ready now, after touring the world, to fulfill a promise to his dad that he would return to work the family farm.

And he’s been there ever since. While Kevin Mann unashamedly radiates a deep passion for cane farming, there is little doubt he enjoyed teaching.

“I always wanted to do the manual things at school, woodwork and metal work, but in those days at All Soul’s School in Charters Towers they were not subjects continued into years 11 and 12.”

So with the blessing of his family he headed off to teachers college in Brisbane and believe it or not graduated as a metal work and woodwork teacher. But he also taught the full range of subjects especially when posted to Hughenden in 1976 where in fact he had his first association with Mark Stoneman, later the National Party member for Burdekin, and co-incidentally the current chair of BDTNRM.

It was where Kevin also got to know Bob Katter who used to visit Hughenden as the MLA for the Wild West. He was also patron of the famous Mid West Football club of which Kevin was a playing member.

Kevin admits his methods are sometimes deemed unconventional. But that goes back to his school teaching days as well.

“I would take off my boots at lunchtime and join the footy game with the students. On occasions I would just happen to go in a bit hard and then whisper to a tackled victim, ‘That’s for the little incident in the second period this morning.’ They got the message. I didn’t have much trouble with my kids at all.”

It was his teaching too that indirectly resulted in his marriage to Amanda, mother of their son Max.

“I was 27 and back living in the Burdekin, a few of the ex-students turned 18 so I decided it might be best to spend my social time and weekends away in Charters Towers. I used to stay at the Rix Hotel where Amanda was the licensee. She is the daughter of a cattle and sheep grazier from Wandoan area north of Dalby and has a rural background.”

So the social visits became more regular and then, after a trip down the aisle, somewhat more permanent. Amanda gave up hospitality to become the mother to their son Max and the hard working wife of a cane farmer and high profile executive of the industry.

Kevin recalls his first two seasons of cane farming were “good” but also remembers the tough times, particularly in the five year period from 1982 when interest rates went through the roof, no one was buying and the sugar price dropped to 2 cents a pound. By comparison last year’s price was as high as 19 cents a pound, a price he says was influenced by the futures market that indicated a world shortage of sugar. But it was not to be, India came back on the international market after a three year drought and today’s sugar price hovers around 10cents per pound.

He says most of the changes in the cane growing industry have been driven by labour costs and shortage. Actual harvesting and machinery hasn’t changed since the eighties but methods of planting have become more automated.

He firmly believes the Burdekin land is best utilised for cane growing and dismisses some suggestion that timber mills might eventually replace sugar mills.

“African mahogany is already being grown here on a small scale,” he says. “I don’t see any big invasion of timber growers. Sugar farming is still viable in the Burdekin and I doubt if crop or vegetable farming will ever be introduced on a large commercial scale either. It could create a huge problem with insects that would require intense spraying.”

He foresees however sugar being used more for energy-based requirements such as alternate power and in particular ethanol.

In fact he is certain ethanol will get more than a mention in the lead up to the federal election and reckons an ethanol producing plant is certain to be established in the Burdekin in the near future.

“It is a definite goer.”

Just like the Mann himself.