



*Our country. Our future.*



## Horticulture

### Applying lessons learnt across industries

*For seed sweet potato grower Eric Coleman, applying lessons learnt from grain growers has allowed him to improve his profitability by reducing his need for herbicides while also decreasing the amount of run-off generated by his farm.*

Eric runs a 23 hectare farm about five minutes from the centre of Gracemere, south-west of Rockhampton. Growing seed sweet potatoes is an intensive industry, but with the support of Fitzroy Basin Association Inc. (FBA), Capricornia Catchments and Growcom through funding from the Australian Government's Reef Programme, he has significantly reduced the impacts his operations have on the reef.

"They've been doing limited till in grains for years, but in vegetables it's quite different. We're extremely intensive... but you can still implement some of this more precision stuff," he said.

#### Minimum till reduces weed seed load

After harvesting his commercial crop of seed sweet potatoes, Eric then plants two forage cover crops to halt the cycle of pests and diseases that affect sweet potatoes. It also has the added advantage of controlling weeds. With the help from the Australian Government's Reef Programme funding, he recently converted from using conventional tillage for the cover crops to minimum tillage techniques. "We do two cover crops in a row with the planter," he said. "So [before converting to minimum tillage] the first cover crop we'd chop that in and plough it in. So I'm not now—I mulch it or I'll just drill directly in and we don't actually plough the ground."

"Instead of having nothing in the ground waiting for a summer cover crop, we plant a winter cover crop, so it'll be some cereal thing that we can use as a mulch. Then as soon as summer hits and that dies off, we can just go straight in and plant forage sorghum in with this planter and you're not actually having to plough it all, chop it in with the rotary hoe or anything aggressive like that."



#### Benefits and incentives

Eric says the Australian Government's Reef Programme is particularly beneficial to smaller operations such as his. "Having the Reef Programme makes you want to try some new stuff. And that bit of incentive helps you adopt some new technologies," he said.

"We're not a big operation, but to go and buy that boom spray without funding, I'd put off because it's a big outlay. Because of the Reef Programme we got some funding towards it and that boom's a lot more efficient. We can get the product on more evenly, and targeted better. We can switch sections off on the boom, so we're not spraying roadways and over edges of crops where you don't need it."



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Eric recommends working towards a long-term improvement plan in stages. "One little project on its own mightn't be as beneficial as doing two or three things that'll slot together," he said. "I'm just trying to do those things together to have that outcome I'm looking for, which is to reduce weeds, better water management and more precision in what I do."

"For us, of course, there's diesel and time and all the rest saved. And that planter has worked out really good. I mean, that's probably the best thing I've done in years."

#### Everyone should do their bit to protect the reef

Eric says helping farmers learn more about managing their operations efficiently is a great, practical initiative. "I'm very positive about the program. I'd like to see it keep going because I think it's a lot more practical than a lot of other programs I've seen over the years."

"I'm pretty happy with those few things I've done. I can come here, and show people, and drive them around and say 'look, we've got no weeds on the banks. There's bugga-all weeds in the field now, and look at this cover crop we've planted—it's no-till, and we're on our second one without turning ground.' I think that's all pretty good stuff that a lot of people could adopt."

For Eric, improving his operation's efficiency and precision is all about good practice as well as limiting his farm's impact on the reef. "I think if everyone does their bit, there won't be a problem. I think the crux of it is what comes off your place in the water that runs off. If you're putting too much fertiliser on and it's running off, it's going somewhere. And if it's running off, well maybe it's a lot of money running off as well."



*Eric Coleman believes that developing a long-term plan and implementing it in stages is the key to ensuring good outcomes for productivity, profits, and the Great Barrier Reef.*



*Upgrading equipment such as boom sprays helps reduce the amount of fertilisers and herbicides needed, which in turn reduces run-off impacts on the reef.*

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