

Caution urged on fertiliser decisions

Local rural retailers are encouraging cane growers to weigh up their options carefully before buying fertilisers this season.

Gordonvale fertiliser retailer, Stan Marsh from S&NI Marsh Pty Ltd, and General Manager of BGA AgriServices, Tim Rees, have raised concerns about growers switching their support to any new fertiliser supplier.

While Stan Marsh acknowledges that growers may want to send a strong message to existing suppliers such as Incitec Pivot, he believes local businesses like his will be the first to suffer if cane growers switch to alternative suppliers.

"We have been in business at Gordonvale for 46 years, supplying local cane and banana growers with fertilisers, fuel, farm chemicals and transport and employing local people," he said.

Stan said while he was reluctant to weigh in on the debate for greater competition in the industry, growers needed to consider the short and long-term consequences of supporting any new supplier with no track record of handling fertilisers in tropical conditions.

"Growers can always obtain fresh fertilisers any time they want from our storage facilities in Gordonvale or 20 minutes away from Incitec Pivot's Cairns facility," he said.

"We stock 12 different fertilisers here in Gordonvale, or if growers need special blends for particular blocks or soil types, they can have those in 24 hours."



Long-time Gordonvale retailer, Stan Marsh (at right) pictured here with his son Andrew.

Stan said these local services and facilities meant growers could always be confident about using fresh, free flowing fertilisers that will spread at the correct rate, without lumps or holdups in the paddock.

S&NI Marsh is a family business in the truest sense, employing 72-year-old Stan, his sons Andrew and Terry, daughter Laurelle, and 11 other employees.

"Just like local farmers, we have been through our fair share of floods, cyclones, low sugar prices and hard times together over the last 46 years, but we are committed to staying here for the long haul," Stan said.

Further south, Tim Rees, General Manager of BGA AgriServices, said he would like to see growers comparing any new offer on a like-for-like basis and considering the implications for the future.

BGA AgriServices is a rural merchandise business with 65 staff working at seven branches, including stores in Childers, Bundaberg and Oakwood.

"We specialise in providing agronomic service and advice to farmers," he said.

BGA AgriServices currently employs three agronomists in the Wide Bay region and nine across all branches.

Tim said he was extremely concerned about how the entry of new fertiliser suppliers would affect their business.

"It's not just our business, but our ability to employ local people and support local farmers and the wider community," he said. ■



Tim Rees from BGA AgriServices (left) launches a new guide to local depression support groups with Karen Baron from the Rotary Club of Kingaroy, in which the company is actively involved.

Growth in ag jobs

AgriFood Skills Australia CEO, Arthur Blewitt, told the ABARE Outlook Conference 2009 that the AgriFood industry was in 'better shape' than other industries in facing up to the effects of the global economic crisis.

The industry was still employing new workers in agriculture and food production and was building its skills capability to meet a genuine demand for workers.

"This is a very good time for people looking for a change of lifestyle to an attractive environment to seriously consider getting work in the AgriFood industry," Arthur said.

"We are still short of people in areas of agriculture and food production and opportunities are there for people who may be displaced from other industries by the downturn. AgriFood offers a career path for existing workers or for students looking for work in an industry that is less likely at this stage to be as badly affected as other industries."

"Now we believe new opportunities for jobs are available. Food production will not be cut back and we expect strong growth to continue on food prices, and world population growth continues to rise."

University of Sydney data show a shortfall of 96,000 people over the next six years in agriculture's top seven occupations: livestock farmers (will need another 34,000), farm hands (21,000), crop farmers (18,000), mixed crop/livestock farmers (14,000), general mobile plant operators (4000), bookkeepers (3000) and shearers (2000).

"The effect of the downturn in the labour market has already started to mobilise much-needed labour for sectors which, until now, have been constrained by chronic labour and skills shortages," Arthur said. "During the mining boom many AgriFood enterprises lost workers; the industry suffered a downturn at a time when the economy was buoyant.

"Several industry sectors are well placed to absorb considerable numbers of displaced workers, raise productivity levels and at the same time drive much of the Government's agenda on sustainability, innovation, biosecurity and innovation."

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