

Reaching the Farmer

SASRI's Extension service consists of 18 Extension Specialists located in the various sugarcane growing regions of the industry. They provide a specialised service to large, medium and small-scale growers with much attention currently being placed on offering specialised services to the large number of farmers entering the industry.

IN RESPONDING TO REQUESTS FROM GROWERS, EXTENSION FACILITATES THE PRODUCTION OF SUGARCANE BY PROMOTING BETTER MANAGEMENT PRACTICES. THEY ALSO ASSIST IN THE ADOPTION OF NEW VARIETIES AND ADVISE LOCAL COMMUNITIES, GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS (E.G. LOCAL ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEES, GROWER COUNCILS AND LOCAL PEST, DISEASE AND VARIETY CONTROL COMMITTEES).

Through Extension, SASRI specialists engage regularly with growers, providing advice, conducting specialist investigations and delivering presentations on research outputs.

Over the years, there has been a gradual change from purely passive advisory work to planned extension. Planned projects conducted by SASRI have had a substantial economic impact on the sugar industry. Group work has long been used in conjunction with advisory work and planned projects. Most Extension Specialists have worked



Extension Specialist Alex Searle (standing at back) and his study group coming to terms with the MyCanesim irrigation scheduling software.

with formal district groups such as farmers' associations, mill groups, and conservation committees. These groups, which were constituted in various ways, formed a platform for discussion and proved to be an extremely useful vehicle for disseminating technical information to all growers.

In addition, there are also smaller "study groups" which are coordinated by the various SASRI Extension Specialists for their specific areas in conjunction with groups of like-minded growers. The growers are keen to exchange and share ideas and advice on best agronomic practices, which tech-

niques work well and which clearly do not work.

While the study group is no substitute for other committees, it can help in finding the direction growers would ideally like to follow, thus assisting Extension to disseminate the information that growers need.

The study group is usually made up of growers willing to listen and open to change. They are open to trial work and this provides a platform to do fairly large, farm-based, extension trials. These can then be discussed at future study group meetings and will assist in finding appropriate strategies for farming in the area.

One such study group is that

started by Alex Searle, Extension Specialist in the Umfolozi area in 2011. The group used mill data to compare different farms based on homogenous zones. Members of the study group then met to discuss the data and learn from each other about what was working best. Initially the groups were topic-driven. However, this year the group has agreed on a schedule of meetings for the rest of the year. Topics are proposed well in advance, with a certain amount of flexibility. Interim meetings are also held, but in all likelihood these would take the form of grower days driven by interest from the specific study group.

Alex assists growers within the study group to attain better yields

by learning from each other, and thus attract more people to join the study groups to aid adoption of the relevant best management practices for the area.

Similar study group initiatives are also being co-ordinated by other SASRI Extension Specialists in their areas.

For more information on study groups or to find one in your area, please contact your local SASRI Extension Specialist (see www.sugar.org.za/sasri for contact details). ✓



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