

# Resources boom has sparked a cane mutiny

Pacific Islands workers will be filling the labour vacuum in northern Australia

SUE NEALES  
RURAL REPORTER

AS the giant harvester began pushing its way through his rippling sugarcane crop in far north Queensland yesterday, Brad Maisel was hopeful of cutting a hefty 82,000 tonnes of cane stalks in the next five months after two cyclone-battered years.

Mr Maisel's 1000ha farm on the Atherton Tablelands is one of the first in Australia to start harvesting this year in a resurgent cane industry buoyed by good prices, rising world sugar demand and an influx of new foreign investment.

But like those of most of Australia's 4000 canegrowers, Mr Maisel's fortunes this season are threatened by the dire shortage of workers in northern Australia.

Nearby mines at Chillagoe, and fly-in, fly-out operations out of Cairns servicing mines further west from Burketown to Mount Isa and beyond, are beckoning any able-bodied workers with their mega-salaries and one-week-on, one-week-off lifestyle.

The chronic lack of labour is so profoundly affecting canegrowers that the federal government has just approved the issuing of seasonal working visas to Pacific Islanders next year, to help bring in the sugar crop.

"We have a complete vacuum of labour because of the mining boom," despairs Mr Maisel.

"Anyone who can drive a truck or heavy machinery around here is off to the mines, and we just can't compete with the money that they can make."

Brad Maisel and his brother Tom — who together manage the irrigated Arriga farm where his family moved from the US in 1984 — are lucky to have local workers to drive their harvesters and "haul-out" trucks carting cane to the local Tablelands sugar mill near Mareeba.

Their regular, mainly older



BRIAN CASSEY

**Sugar farmer Brad Maisel says he can't match the money being paid by the mining companies and fears he won't have enough labour to harvest his crop**

workers prefer the cane-season rhythm of toiling for long hours for five months during the sugar harvest, with plenty of well-paid overtime, weekend and night shifts, followed by seven months off between seasons, to the disruptive fly-in, fly-out mining routine.

It is no *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* existence any more, though. Cane harvesting is thoroughly mechanised, with large header machines driving

their way through the 3m-tall crops, cutting 70 tonnes of cut stalks (billets) an hour, that will yield 10 tonnes of refined sugar.

The days of sweaty men in singlets armed with long knives and cutlasses hacking their way through burning canefields squirming with rats and snakes are long gone.

But Steve Greenwood, chief executive of Canegrowers Australia, says there is nothing romantic

or appealing about farming a crop when there are not enough workers for the seasonal harvest.

He estimates the industry is short about 500 workers this season, in a year when production is rebounding, prices are up and the national cane harvest is set to exceed 31 million tonnes, worth \$2.1 billion.

"The season is only just kicking off. The Tablelands mill was the first to start crushing yesterday,

but it's very much going to be a case of wait and see what the impact of this shortage is," Mr Greenwood said.

"But the industry is expanding again after years of shrinking, so we do need to look at our labour constraints and other problems now to plan for the future."

Mr Greenwood said that urgent appeals to the federal government for the Pacific Islands seasonal working scheme — used by fruit

growers in the Murray Valley over summer — to be extended to the sugarcane industry this year had failed.

But next year, big numbers of workers from Fiji and Papua New Guinea with some experience in farming and cane harvesting will be approved working visas for the five-month season.

Mr Greenwood said he did not see any parallels with the contentious federal government visa ap-

## Call to consider US model and pay farmers to farm

AUSTRALIAN taxpayers may have to start paying farmers to remain living and working on their farms and producing food, as happens in the US and Europe.

American Farmland Trust president Jon Scholl told a Farm Institute conference in Sydney that, without such subsidies, grants and incentives, farmers living within a 200km radius of major cities would find it increasingly hard to remain financially viable.

Such payments were not about propping up bad farmers, but about the public purse being used for the greater good.

"It is important we save farmland because it is rapidly disappearing: the United States lost 23 million acres (9.6 million hectares) of farmland in the last 25 years and Australia a similar proportion," he said.

"We like to say 'No farms, no food', and that certainly resonates and helps people understand on one level why we have to protect our farmland

from being converted or subdivided or won't be able to continue producing food and fibre locally."

In the US, a farmer can get a grant, for example, to buy a minimum tillage tractor for \$400,000, so they can afford to change their practices in a way that reduces erosion and dust storms and benefits the public.

There are also one-off payments where a farmer can be granted hundreds of thousands by state and federal governments from a \$US150 million annual pool if a permanent covenant is put over a farm against subdivision for housing.

"It is a farm subsidy to a certain extent, but there is a societal value to it because it recognises there are public benefits in maintaining the productivity of agricultural land and compacting urban growth.

"Directly it helps the farmer with the pressure to stay viable because he can use it to pay off debt or expand his farm, and it removes the need that some producers may feel to sell their farm to a property developer at a price way beyond what its productive value is worth."

SUE NEALES

proval for Chinese labourers to work for billionaire mining magnate Gina Rinehart.

"I don't think they are connected. The Pacific Islander workers scheme is only seasonal. Their visas are only for the short, set period of the cane harvest and then they return home," Mr Greenwood explained.

"And the program comes with a fair bit of responsibility on the part of the growers who are employing them. You have to look after their wellbeing as well as provide them with jobs."

Mr Greenwood said this year's harvest, which started on the Tablelands yesterday, would swing into full operation over the next month, as Australia's other 22 sugar-processing mills from Grafton to Mossman started crushing.

Buoyant sugarcane prices of about \$460 a tonne and forward

contracts above \$500 a tonne — after bad years of floods, cyclones and prices hovering just above \$200 a tonne — were fuelling an expansion of sugarcane areas and a new interest in the industry by corporate investors, he said.

A rush of Asian investment into Queensland's neglected sugar mills has also fuelled optimism of increased efficiencies and profits.

Foreign ownership of Australian sugar-mill assets has jumped from 15 per cent to more than 70 per cent in the past 18 months following the purchase of Maryborough Sugar's four mills by Thai company Mitr Phol in February, Prosperpine Mill by Singapore-based Wilmar International and its Australian subsidiary Sucrogen in December, and the acquisition of Tully Sugar by Chinese state-owned food conglomerate Cofco last July.