

# Sugar comes back from the dead

Ian Gerard *The Australian*  
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NORTH Queensland sugar cane farmer Brett Coulthard is finally fixing farm equipment he has not been able to use in more than a year.

"We are getting to fix it now but we are down a tractor because we didn't want to spend the money before," he says. "There's machinery I should have operational now that's still in pieces."

The third-generation cane grower from Mossman, north of Port Douglas, is able to get through his backlog of maintenance jobs because of a revival in the world price of sugar this year.

Coulthard has also been able to plant a larger crop this year and buy a greater amount of fertiliser, improving yield.

"There's a lot of positive feeling for the next couple of years," he says. "Things have definitely picked up."

Twelve months ago, the outlook for canegrowers was dour and many were considering alternative crops. The federal Govern-

## SWEET RETURNS



ment's \$444 million sugar industry rescue package saved many cane farms from collapse.

But this month, world sugar prices have soared above the US9c a pound mark, almost double what they were in 2003, and good weather has given NSW and Queensland growers a bumper harvest.

Farmers who earlier this year expected just \$200 for a tonne of cane can now get up to \$270 a tonne.

While motorists have had to pay more for petrol, canegrowers have enjoyed watching raw sugar rise in concert with the soaring world oil price.

Australian canegrowers are reaping the benefits of Brazil diverting much of its sugarcane into ethanol to keep pace with demands for green energy.

The turnaround in fortunes for cane farmers has resulted in only 18 growers taking up the federal Government's offer of \$100,000 to leave the industry.

Most farmers have already received about \$8000 and can expect another payment in January.

"Although the situation is by no means buoyant, farm returns are generally improving and short-term prospects are far better than they were at the start of the year,"



Field of dreams: Coulthard says the world sugar price rise has allowed him to plant a bigger crop Picture: Steve Brennan

Canegrowers general manager Ian Ballantyne says. "One swallow doesn't make a summer but it is a very encouraging sign."

In the cane-rich fields of far north Queensland, 8 million tonnes of cane is expected to have been crushed when harvesting ends in late November. Importantly, the commercial sugar con-

tent in the cane is also at some of the highest levels ever recorded.

Drew Watson's family have been growing cane around Mossman for more than 100 years.

He says that despite state government fears that better times for growers would make farmers reluctant to diversify out of sugar,

cane farmers would be more likely to look at alternative crops when they could afford the risk.

"Now if you get some cash flow out of sugarcane you might see some alternatives," Watson says. "I still think people have a nibble around the edges. This has been a long hard slog and has given people a real scare."