

# Sugar town canes the downturn

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Farmer David 'Jock' Killer in his canefields near Bargara in Queensland yesterday

## Bundaberg's primary industry shielded it from financial gloom

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WHILE the financial centres of Australia were damaged by the global economic crisis, the town built on sugar barely flinched.

Bundaberg, in the southeast of Queensland, is revelling in its annual sugarcane harvest, buoyant on the back of near-record prices.

After battling through the dismal years of the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the industry is back on track to achieve \$1 billion in revenue this year.

Yesterday, second-generation

cane farmer David (Jock) Killer walked his fields and observed the harvest at his 99ha farm near the picturesque seaside town of Bargara.

"It's a lifestyle, the way of life, the sense of achievement," he said, of his lifelong love of farming.

"I've been here all my life — almost 70 years. It's a very exciting time of year."

The farm has been in the Killer family since 1932 and is managed by one of Mr Killer's sons. Now his grandsons work there too.

Two-storey-tall harvesters loop back and forwards through the crop, chopping the burnt cane with ease.

It's far from the labour-intensive days of manual cutting and harvesting before the 1970s: Mr Killer remembers how a good

cane man could cut and load 50 tonnes a week. By the end of the season, those men would be rangy, tough and extremely fit.

Cane train driver Cecil Russell bounds with enthusiasm about his chosen profession.

He first fronted up to work when his trains were steam-powered, far from the diesel machines that these days haul almost 400 tonnes in one go.

From the dismal days of the 1990s and early 2000s — when deregulation and low sugar prices poleaxed the industry — cane farmers are getting back on track.

Last year's record sugar price of about \$500 a tonne was almost double the low-return days of the early 2000s, and industry leaders are hopeful the price will maintain its strength this year. Agricultural

forecasts from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural & Resource Economics in March suggested prices would remain high over the coming two years but retreat from their record prices after that, as production increases after a period of decline.

Peak body Canefarmers predicts a 10 per cent increase in production this year.

Bundaberg Mayor Lorraine Pyefinch said the high sugar price had boosted the town.

The whole of the Bundaberg economy in some ways benefits from the sugar price, she said.

"We did have such a dramatic downturn, but now the economy is a lot more diverse and robust," she told *The Australian*. "Because of the sugar prices, we haven't noticed the GFC much at all."