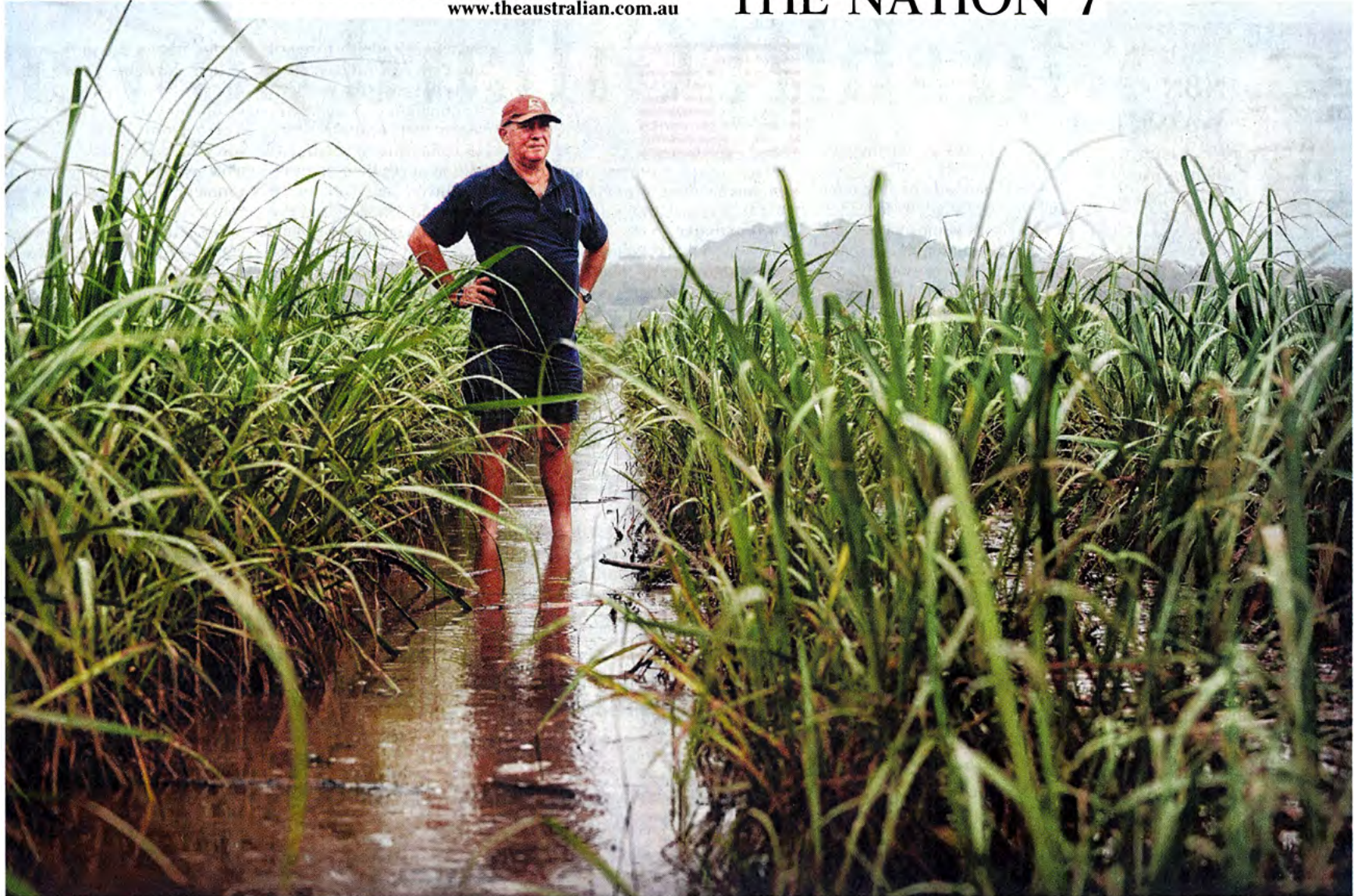


Cane resurgence gets stuck in the mud

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Grower Robert Quirk, on his water-logged plantation near Tweed Heads on the far north coast of NSW, has lost a quarter of his cane crop

AMOS AIKMAN

EVEN as the new year bells rang, NSW cane growers were already thinking this would be the year they would get back on their feet.

After a devastating season last year in which many lost more than half their crop to floods and some had their young plants washed out twice, growers were predicting a "roaring comeback", with sugar prices high and their best-quality crop in years.

Standing knee-deep in water, his young plants slowly stewing

under the summer sun, Robert Quirk doesn't feel so confident now. "That was the story a month ago. Now it doesn't look so bright," he said.

Mr Quirk, who farms in the Tweed River valley in the far north of NSW, where he is also president of the Tweed Cane Growers Association, says in 120 years the local industry has never lost so much in such a short time.

He reckons at least a quarter of his cane crop is gone, as is almost all his soya beans. Other growers, he says, have lost half their cane or more and their entire soya

crop, for the second year in a row. Not until the water recedes will growers be able to fully assess the extent of the damage, and with more rain forecast that could take some days.

"The problem is the guys that really suffered last year will be the ones to cop it again this year," Mr Quirk said.

Thomas George, the Nationals MP for the nearby seat of Lismore and Deputy Speaker of the NSW lower house, flew over the area twice last week and said he saw the situation get substantially worse.

"Some of the paddocks that have been replanted were completely under water," he said.

He and other local MPs would lobby NSW Primary Industries Minister Katrina Hodgkinson to have the area natural-disaster declared, which gives councils and farmers access to recovery funds.

The NSW opposition yesterday rubbished the state government for acting too slowly in helping those affected by floods.

A key problem is mud that settles from floodwater into the heart of cane plants causes them to rot.

Further south, on the Clarence River, Vince Castle, a local grower and president of the Clarence Valley and NSW Cane Growers Associations, says all the doomsday predictions he made after last year's floods came true.

He believes the crop for the region will be half its normal size, with some areas experiencing their lowest yields since the 1970s.

The above-average sugar price will be cold comfort if the heavy rain were to return, he said.

"We have only got to get another day and a half of rain and we will get another major flood."