

End of tradition a burning issue for canegrowers



CAMERON LAIRD

Ian Harney, who works with Gary Stockham on his sugarcane property at Giru, Queensland, sets one side of a cane field alight during a traditional burn operation this week

Old ways are changing for many sugar farmers — but not all

JAMIE WALKER

IT'S a clear, cool evening in north Queensland, perfect for what sugarcane grower Gary Stockham has in mind.

He lights the drip torch and hands it to his workmate, Ian Harney. Carefully, it's carried along the break they've cut through the tinder-dry cane on the Stockham farm, outside of Giru, setting the crop ablaze.

Flames dance into the inky sky, higher and higher until they tower over the two men. Soon the paddock is engulfed.

Being up close to the sound and fury of a cane fire in full roar is like nothing else you have experienced. "Sometimes it goes really good," Mr Stockham says. "If you get the wind at the right angle, you see it come across as a front — the flames can be 10m high, easy."

As he mops his brow from the white-hot fire, Mr Stockham keeps a wary eye out in case this is

the one to get away from him.

"You don't ever take it for granted," he says of the blaze. "These things can move fast. You don't just light up and shut your eyes when you're burning cane."

What was a fixture in the sugar country running from north of Cairns to south of the Tweed on the Queensland-NSW border has turned into a fading glory, as growers give away the torch and embrace green harvesting.

This leaves in place the thick undergrowth of trash that used to be fired before cutting, forming a blanket to nurture the next crop. Good for the planet and good for the farm balance sheet, its proponents say.

More than 80 per cent of the nation's sugar crop of 32 million tonnes will be cut green this year, with most of the hold-out burning taking place in the Burdekin, south of Townsville.

There, cane fires will continue to light up the sky until December, when the crushing season ends. This week, they formed a glowing circle around Giru township, where Mr Stockham, 57, runs a

200ha farm and contract harvesting business.

Ash fell from the sky in what the locals call "Burdekin snow".

The farmers have stuck with burning for two eminently practical reasons. First, the cane they grow is thicker and taller than average, and weighed down by more trash. Burdekin crops are murder on mechanical harvesters if cut green, the locals say.

"It's tough stuff," agrees Canegrowers Australia chief Steve Greenwood.

The area relies on flood irrigation and is crisscrossed by water channels and furrows that would be choked if cane trash were left on the ground. "It's a sugar community and people live with it," Mr Greenwood says of the burning.

The fires are lit from June to December, but only when conditions allow in the relative still of late afternoon and early evening. People have died after flames were pushed back on them by an unexpected wind shift.

Mr Stockham's preparations are meticulous. First, he climbs up on the tractor to plough a 5m cor-

ridor in the cane to make a fire break. Mr Harney follows on foot with the petrol and diesel-fuelled drip torch. Ten hectares of cane go up in minutes, the flames leaping 6-8m high.

With the sugar price at \$450 a tonne — up about 80 per cent on what it was five years ago — and the cane bouncing back from the unseasonal rains that marred the start of harvesting in June, the Burdekin growers are looking to a bumper season.

Australia is the world's third-largest sugar exporter, behind Thailand and Brazil. When Mr Stockham got into the industry 20 years ago, less than a third of the national crop was cut green. Now most is — but not in Giru.

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