

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Media Release

NRMMC06/1

21 April 2006

Tweed Valley cane farmer wins the McKell Medal

Tweed Valley sugar cane grower Robert Quirk has won the 16th McKell Medal for excellence in natural resource management.

Mr Quirk has run a 200-hectare cane farm at Duranbah in northern NSW for the past 44 years.

He was named McKell Medal winner today by joint Chairmen of Australia's Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Peter McGauran, and Minister for Environment and Heritage Senator Ian Campbell.

The McKell Medal is awarded by the Australian, State and Territory governments for outstanding contributions to improving land and water management through on-farm action, scientific research and community involvement.

It commemorates the work of Sir William McKell, a former NSW Premier (1941-47) and Governor General (1947-53), who made a significant contribution to improving soil and land conservation in Australia.

"Robert Quirk has made a major contribution to better natural resource management particularly in relation to intensive cane growing on acid sulfate soils, and is a worthy recipient of the McKell Medal," the Ministers said.

"Chosen from a field of 21 outstanding candidates, Mr Quirk has a long-standing interest in innovative agriculture in finding better ways of sustaining the soil and increasing crop production, and reducing chemical use and the harmful effects of effluent.

"His approach to farming the Tweed Valley's acid sulfate-rich volcanic and tidal soils, for example, has enabled him to reduce chemical use by 25 per cent, decrease heavy metal and acidity discharge by 80 per cent, and increase productivity by 38 per cent.

"Many of the practices Mr Quirk has developed are now considered world's best practice for farming acid sulfate soils. Not surprisingly, the Quirk family farm at Duranbah has become a popular stop-over for politicians, growers, engineers, tourists and students.

"He has also played a key role in developing the NSW Sugar Cane Industry's Best Management Guidelines for Farming Practices and for Acid Sulphate Soils."

Robert Quirk is a board member with the Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority the key funding body for community-run natural resource management projects in the Northern Rivers region.

Mr Quirk recently became Chair of the Better Sugarcane Initiative Global Forum, which is working to identify best management practices in international sugarcane growing.

More information on Robert Quirk is attached. The McKell Medal is awarded annually (the 16th covers 2005). Nominations for the 17th medal are now open and will close in November 2006 — visit www.daff.gov.au/mckellmedal

.../2

Backgrounder

Robert Quirk — 16th McKell Medal winner

For nearly 45 years, Robert Quirk has run a 200ha farm devoted to the intensive cultivation of sugarcane in northern NSW's Tweed Valley. During that time, he has worked hard to get the best out of the region's volcanic and tidal soils with their high acid sulfate content.

The results have been impressive to say the least, a 25 per cent reduction in chemical use; an 80 per cent decrease in heavy metal and acidity discharges; and a 38 per cent increase in productivity.

Robert has put in place a system that enables a single harvester and seven workers to harvest 150,000 tonnes of sugarcane a year. He is also involved in a milling venture that includes its own sugar refinery and can co-generate electricity by burning bagasse.

Not content to sit on his laurels, Robert is now developing a 2ha wetland to reduce discharges from his farm and recover harmful monosulfides and heavy metals.

His farming system involves monitoring the weather, the water table, drain levels and the acidity of discharges. The farm has been electronically mapped, enabling him to assess his operations, his production methods and farm accounts via computer at a moment's notice.

Robert is also a prominent community leader, keen to pass on his farming methods to visiting political leaders, growers, engineers, tourists and students.

And he has spread the word across the globe, attending international conferences and dialogues. The management practices developed on his property are already being used across the world.

Robert often invites farmers, economists, scientists or political figures to study his management practices first-hand, and is a regular contributor to local newspapers and journals, and a frequent participant in local, national and international conferences.

He was one of five farmers asked to help prepare a self-assessment workbook 'COMPASS' which enables growers to compare their performances against those of their peers.

At present, he is developing a new farm management system; better management practices for farming in acid sulfate soils and a digital way of recording and widely disseminating information on best management practices.

In addition to his own research on trash retention and overall soil health, Robert has invited leading Australian scientists in to inspect his farming practices and asked their graduate students to undertake research on his property.

To date, 11 Ph.D. students have taken up the offer, researching areas as diverse as remediating acid sulfate soils, water quality, soil health, microbial activity and nitrogen gas emissions.

Not surprisingly, many of the practices developed on Robert's property are now considered world's best practice for farming acid sulfate soils.

In 2001, Robert received a Winston Churchill Fellowship to research ways of eliminating the acid content of water leaving his property. The Fellowship subsequently led to presentations and conferences in the USA, the Netherlands and China.