

# Africa Tractor is a sweet investment for cane farmer



**The evergreen Pongola valley bordering this northernmost KwaZulu-Natal town is fair testament to the fertile soils beneath and, with irrigation water at hand, a very good place to grow sugar.**

It is also on many of the valley's sugar farms that cane handling and haulage equipment made by Bell Equipment is a clear indication of the trust and confidence the landowners have in the marque.

Once such farm is Estrinx, owned by the Johnson family of Monzi further south, a family with a long lineage cultivating sugar in Zululand. Andrew Johnson spoke to us about their expansion to the Pongola area. "We're fairly recent arrivals in the Pongola area having bought three farms in the area," he says. "Our first task was to replant most of the cane and then put plans in place to get our cane to the Pongola sugar mill."

A big part of the latter was to buy a new haulage tractor to haul the tandem cane trailers and this they did in April 2012, taking delivery of a new Bell 1716A Rigid Tractor, bought from the Bell Customer Service Centre in Empangeni with Bell Sales Representative Haig Thompson doing the necessary.

"We've had a great relationship with Bell Equipment, and more specifically with Haig Thompson and Michael and David Campbell for many years, and it was not a difficult decision to choose the Bell 1716A Rigid Tractor as our hauler of choice for this operation."

The Pongola valley is relatively flat, making it easy for tandem cane trailers to be loaded infield. Estrinx Farm's cane is loaded during daylight hours using two Bell 120 Cane Loaders and their allocations at the mill sees them hauling cane from 21h00 until noon the following day. Currently around 23 loads per week are delivered over distances varying between 8 and 15 kilometres.

"We like the ergonomics of the new Bell 1716A Rigid Tractors and the improved cab layout and instrumentation with good all-round visibility, reduces potential driver fatigue," says Kobus Lombaard, one of the farm managers. "The powerful Deutz engine and Allison automatic gearbox also ensures smooth haulage of the 26-tonnes payload and proves that a dedicated haul tractor works better in this application than a normal agricultural tractor would."

Even with the machine nearing the 2 500-hour mark in just on six months of use, mechanical availability had been high. Service intervals are set at 250 hours with

major servicing at 1 000 hours. All servicing is done by technicians from the Bell Customer Service Centre in Empangeni under a service plan.

"With the area being relatively flat, we chose the 4x2 version of the Bell 1716 Tractor and this works for us," Andrew Johnson adds. "We're also very happy with the fuel consumption under full load of between 6 and 8 litres of diesel per hour, a fact which clearly gives us a lower cost per tonne."

Bell Equipment's Marketing Manager: Sugar and Forestry, Tim Beningfield said: "With the Africa Tractors we have, in essence, gone back to the basics to deliver to the market a robust, purpose-built haulage workhorse, which is strong and reliable as well as simple in design for easy maintenance and longevity. Yet those customers who want the bells and whistles still have the opportunity to include them on their Tractors as optional extras.

"What is truly revolutionary with the Africa Tractors is for the first time customers can get a true built for haulage machine at little or no premium, cost per kilowatt wise, over a farm tractor. On a cost per tonne basis Bell has a big advantage so from here out there is no good reason to use anything else for haulage," said Beningfield.

Andrew Johnson concurs: "This one Bell Rigid Tractor hauling two tandem rigs will be delivering 30 000 tonnes of cane to the Pongola mill this year and should we manage to increase our production in the near future, we will expand our haulage side with another Bell 1716A Rigid Tractor," he says.



*Estrinx Farm Managers, Kobus Lombard (left) and Sampie Scheepers (right) with owner, Andrew Johnson with the farm's Bell 1716A Haulage Tractor.*