Fourth generation farmer recognizes similarity and synergy with Bell

“We’re all aware that the sugar industry is going through tough times and I like to tell growers that tough times never last, tough people do. It’s a slogan that fits with Bell. Bell is tough and their machines are tough, as we all know,” says Graeme Stainbank, a fourth generation farmer and outgoing Chairman of the South Africa Cane Growers’ Association (SALGA).

The Stainbank family started sugarcane farming in 1856 when Graeme’s great grandfather bought land in the Yellowwood Park area of Durban, where the Kenneth Stainbank Nature Reserve stands today. The family bought additional land in the Eston area in 1871 to accommodate farm labourers on private land so that they were exempt from paying ‘hut tax’, which was designed to encourage men to find work on the mines.

By 1950 Durban had developed to the extent that the Stainbank family decided to relocate to Eston where they have flourished. The family split up the original farm over the years as each new generation came onboard. When the farms were split between Graeme’s father and his two brothers, his father – a nature lover - took two sections, one of which borders the Gwahumbe Nature Reserve.

"I'm the fourth generation and I have fourth generation families working here with me. My foreman is fourth generation, and his father was my father's foreman, so there are a lot of old family ties," he says.

Graeme graduated from university and worked for the South African Sugar Research Institute (SASRI) for two years before starting to farm in 1991 when the farm neighbouring his father's came on the market. He took a loan as a first-time buyer from the Landbank to purchase the land and put paid to his plans to travel overseas.

Over the next 25 years good fortune saw Graeme add another three farms to his operation. While Graeme has benefitted from neighbouring farms becoming available, he says it is not ideal for the industry that smaller growers sell up as it reduces employment opportunities and shrinks farming communities. He illustrates his point saying: "In my father's time he had 360ha under cane and employed 96 people. Today we have 1 200ha of cane and employ 105 people."

The 1 200 hectares of dryland cane yield an average of 50 000 tonnes. Pivotal to his harvesting operation are three Bell tri-wheeled Cane Loaders, which work 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the 38 weeks of the harvesting season. "These machines just keep going. They only stop for a service. My only regret regarding the Bell Cane Loader is the one that I have sold. I sold one to my brother-in-law thinking that it was near the end of its life and it's still going 12 years later without ever having to do the motor!"

"I've often looked at other loading options available but the Bell Loaders are made for our conditions and I've always chosen to stick to what I know."

Graeme's Cane Loader fleet includes a 1997 and a 2003 model, which return fuel consumption figures of 5,7 litres per hour and have each accumulated over 20 000 hours. The third is a 2018 model 225A Cane Loader, one of the last to be produced before the introduction of the new F-series. This machine is fitted with double tyres for better traction in steeper terrain and uses 6,9 litres per hour due to the more arduous conditions.

About 90% of cane is loaded infield. Haulage to the Illovo Mill, 11km away, is predominantly handled by two tractors pulling tri-axle trailers with a 22t payload.

Graeme has recently completed his two-year chairmanship of SACGA, during which time the unprecedented challenges facing the sugar industry have converged to form a perfect storm creating uncertain times and economic hardship.

Commenting on the challenges, Graeme says sugar tax has had the largest impact, reducing demand for sugar by almost 20% - a loss of 300 000t of local market sugar. With labour accounting for 30% of farming costs, shrinking margins have resulted in a direct loss of up to 10 000 jobs. This margin squeeze has also been particularly hard on our large number of small-scale growers who have been unable to expand or diversify.

With the sugar tax effectively tripling the cost that sugar sweetened beverage manufacturers pay for the product, Graeme says it far outweighs any other sin tax and is grossly unfair. "Manufacturers have been forced to reformulate because no one can take that type of increase on their production costs."

Adding to the unfairness, says Graeme, is the new thinking that sugar could be a natural inhibitor to overeating because of its sickly, sweet taste. "In the countries where sugar consumption is decreasing, obesity is increasing so you have to ask yourself, where is the correlation?"

Imported sugar remains a contentious issue due to the unlevel playing field facing local growers. While imports have dropped significantly from 500 000t to just over 100 000t, Graeme is of the opinion that imports would be inconsequential if they were subjected to a more level playing field. "In recent months we've had a lot of Indian sugar dumped here that is export subsidized contrary to World Trade Organization regulations. We have a surplus removal scheme whereby we export any excess production, which maintains our local price for us. Eswatini and other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries benefit from the higher local market price without contributing towards the surplus removal. Our immediate neighbours also benefit from our research because a lot of their milling companies are South African-based and get free technology from SASRI without contributing," he explains.

During his tenure Graeme believes SACGA has regained political legitimacy for cane growers, as sugar has been demonized in recent years. Some headway has been made with the various challenges and with building relationships with millers, customers and downstream users. "Although more political than I ever imagined, it has been a good life experience and interacting with the growers has been the best part of the job," he says.

Looking forward, Graeme is confident the industry is on the right path. "Farmers are very similar to Bell, the company, in that we're tough, resilient, adaptive and we're here to stay. Right now, as growers, we're busy finding ways to adapt and survive. Sugarcane is a magnificent crop. It produces more biomass per hectare than other commodity crop. There's a great interest in cellulosic ethanol from timber yet we 'smoke' them in biomass production per hectare, and when you bring in water efficiency we're even better. It's a wonderful crop. We've just got to adapt to see in which other ways we can use it.

"Like Bell adapted from making Cane Loaders to manufacturing Tractors and other products, we've got to have the same vision in the sugar industry and try and look for other opportunities. In our case it will take a change in legislation because currently growers only benefit from the sale of sugar and molasses. We're actively working on reviewing the legislation to allow growers to effectively benefit from other parts of the crop as well."