

## Farmer goes solar to beat power price rises



Bundaberg cane grower Kelvin Griffin is a self-proclaimed guinea pig. He has spent \$145,000 to escape from spiralling electricity costs.

Queensland's irrigated cane farms have seen their Ergon Energy power prices rise 120% over the past seven years, leaving many of them struggling to give their crops the irrigation water they need.

So desperate had the struggle become that Kelvin has staked the future of his family business on a \$145,000 solar system designed to power the farm's high-pressure irrigation pumps and get them off the grid and out of the reach of Ergon's bills.

"We'd cut back on using the Ergon grid as much as possible," said Kelvin, who runs the 80 ha property on the outskirts of Bargara with wife Helen and son Jason. "We'd only use the electricity sparingly on weekends or late at night on the cheapest tariffs. It was really holding us back and production was down at least 10 to 15%."

After much soul searching and crunching of numbers, the family decided in 2014 to take a leap of faith into the world of solar powered high-pressure irrigation. The concrete slab bases alone cost \$25,000 and by the time the 200 panel 55Kw system was completed the family had taken on \$100,000 of debt.

"It was a huge decision for us as a family," Kelvin said. "Financially we were obviously taking on a big debt, but also the system itself was something new. There are plenty of examples of solar-powered low pressure irrigation systems, but not with high pressure pumps, so it was a bit of a risk.

"But now that it's in and operational and we see power prices going up again by another 12%, it does make you sleep a little easier knowing you've made a good decision for the future of the business," Kelvin said.

He's confident he'll see massive savings, not to mention a boost in production, over the system's 25-year life.

"If we irrigated using grid electricity we'd be handing over \$40,000 to \$50,000 to Ergon in the next year alone," he said. "Now instead we'll be paying that off a system that we'll own completely debt-free in around five years. At the same time we'll be boosting production by 10 to 15%."

Kelvin Griffin has been getting a lot of calls from other irrigators about their solar experiment.

"I'm not surprised, because the rising power prices are really hurting people. It's a real impost on agriculture and rural communities in general," Kelvin said.

"We don't mind paying our fair share, but at the minute power prices are just being used as another tax. You

just need to take a look at crops around the region and you can almost tell where people are using Ergon power to irrigate, because that's where the crops are suffering due to growers cutting back on watering."

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Sarah McKinnon, NFF