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It was a year of fortunes won and lost, as big rural investments were announced and Mother Nature continued to prove her influence is inescapable. As Christmas looms, Rural Weekly looks back on the 2014 that was.

#### THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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IN MARCH, plans were announced to build a \$60million quarter horse racing and equestrian facility by 2016.

The proposal included a **hotel**, convention centre, **residential** development and equine centre of excellence, after the Queensland Government granted a joint Australian and American consortium a licence to race quarter horses near Imbil.

Gympie Mayor Ron Dyne said struggling farmers in the Mary Valley growing livestock feed would also have another market for their produce.

#### MAY

BUNDABERG Sugar's Bingera mill was badly damaged by a fire that caused about \$3million worth of damage and delayed the start of crushing.

It was believed the fire started in a switch room and then spread to a transformer and four conveyors.

The mill started crushing following the extensive repairs on July 21, two weeks later than initially planned.

Bingera mill crushes most of the cane on the north side of the Burnett River, but a small amount is trucked to the **company's** Millaquin mill.

THE Australian macadamia industry, the world's largest producer of the only commercially viable native Australian food product, celebrated its 40th year in 2014.

The celebration – which included an event at the Sydney Opera House featuring celebrity chefs – marked 40 years since the Australian Macadamia Society (and with it, full-scale **commercial** production) was established in 1974.

There are now more than 850 growers across three states, and six **million** trees producing about 40,000 tonnes per year. Of the total production, 60% is exported as kernel to the world market.

Macadamias are primarily **sold** as kernel and processed for snack food and as an ingredient in food products.

IRRIGATORS started their push for the State Government to act on the soaring power prices they claim are crippling growers and forcing many to walk off farms. The lobbying started with a forum in Bundaberg for farmers and peak bodies, led by Canegrowers and the National Irrigators' Council, and has continued throughout the year.

Canegrowers Queensland senior vice-chairman Allan Dingle said the organisation feared the State Government – the 100% owner of Ergon **Energy** – would not reduce direct costs to farmers.

He said this was despite Canegrowers presenting strong evidence to the government that reducing power prices by 33% immediately for growers would be revenue-neutral, with many farmers now choosing to switch off their pumps because the cost to run them was prohibitive.

Mr Dingle, also a Bundaberg cane grower, said even sustained rainfall would not impact on the core issue around exorbitant power prices for irrigators.

Canegrowers electricity committee chairman Rajinder Singh said the battle over irrigator power prices had been raging since 2010 and it was now time for the government to provide essential relief for farmers.

## JUNE

THE Maryborough Sugar Factory (MSF) announced \$15.5million of investment into an overhaul of irrigation on its properties across the Maryborough district.

The investment will pay for the installation of centre-pivot irrigation, which distributes water more evenly, can **lead** to higher tonnages and costs less to run – an advantage in the face of ever-increasing electricity prices.

MSF have also employed a consultant to discuss irrigation and efficiencies with growers, and have indicated a willingness to consider financing farmers interested in installing the technology on their own properties.

The first centre pivots were installed on an MSF farm in Boonooroo Rd, with more set to come online soon.

HEAVY early winter frosts damaged sugar cane in parts of the Wide Bay region, in particular in the Isis and Maryborough districts.

It was estimated up to half of Maryborough cane farmers would have virtually nothing to crush this season, with the frost coming on the back of a long drought and flood damage early in 2013.

In the Isis district, about 15% of cane was said to be damaged, but the Isis Mill worked hard with harvesters and growers to maximise the harvest, and eventually finished the crush with a figure 180kg higher than the 2013 tonnage.

## AUGUST

THE first decent rain in many months fell across the district, leading to some much-needed good news for cattle sales across the Wide Bay.

Soon afterwards, the Burnett Beef Ball was held and revellers toasted the heavens opening up.

Cattle **sale** numbers picked up – in Gympie a record 2570 head were yarded at Sullivan Livestock's saleyards – along with prices. And while there has been some volatility in the market since as a result of the varying quality of the cattle, the prices have generally held **firm**.

## SEPTEMBER

THE Australian Senate and the Queensland Government both set up inquiries into sugar marketing after three of the state's major sugar millers decided to split from marketing body Queensland Sugar Ltd (QSL).

Millers Wilmar, MSF and Tully Mills gave notice they would market their own sugar from 2017.

That left the millers at Bundaberg, Isis and Mackay with QSL.

It also meant QSL would only have 600,000 tonnes to market when the split happens – just a fifth of its annual average of three **million** tonnes.

QSL CEO Greg Beashel said after the announcement the body was a non-profit organisation that was half owned by the millers and half by the growers.

Wilmar claimed it achieved better prices by doing its own marketing.

Submissions to the Senate inquiry closed in November but the committee will have until April 2015 to prepare a report for the Federal Government.

#### NOVEMBER

AUSTRALIAN **billionaire** Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting bought into a **dairy** enterprise in the Gympie hinterland.

The woman who picked the **mining** boom by betting on **iron ore** is now putting her money on powdered **milk** after taking a 90% **stake** in Hope Dairies.

The **business** has signed a memorandum of understanding to invest \$500million in a baby formula processing plant in the Mary Valley and 5000ha of farmland in the South Burnett.

The 30,000 tonnes of powdered **milk** it wants to start producing in 2016 will be exported to **China**.

About a quarter of the **milk** it needs will come from local farms.

Hancock Prospecting spokesman Jason Morrisson said the project was a substantial investment for Mrs Rinehart.

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