



## The *New* American Farmer

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Jackie Judice and family, Northside Planting LLC

Franklin, Louisiana

### Summary of Operation

- *3,300 acres sugar cane*
- *Soybeans to diversify, add nitrogen*

### Problem Addressed

Low sugar prices. In 1993, sixth- and seventh-generation sugar cane farmers Jackie Judice and his sons, Clint and Chad, realized that if profits continued to fall they were within five years of losing the family farm. They started looking for new solutions to old problems: real estate signs lining the highways as cane farmers sold out to urban sprawl and sugar yields not responding to increased inputs.

### Background

By adopting a systems approach, the Judices have improved their soils, resulting in a 25-percent increase in yield and a 20-percent drop in total input costs. Their work hasn't gone unnoticed. In 1999, their farm, Northside Planting, won Sterling Sugar's award for top sugar production in the 1,500-acre-and-up category. In 1998, it won the production award in that size category for the entire state.

Farm failure was not an option for the Judices. "My family's been raising cane for 200 years, and I wasn't going to let it go down on my watch," says Jackie.

Seagoing metaphors, determination and family loyalty come naturally to Jackie, whose namesake, Jacques Judice, was a shipbuilder in Alsace-Lorraine, France. In 1718, Jacques and his brother, Louis, built a ship and sold passages on it to finance their move to the New World. In 1800, the Judice family began raising sugar cane west of the Atchafalaya Swamp, where they have been ever since.

Today Jackie, Chad, and Clint are partners in Northside Planting. Recently, Jackie's wife Rochelle turned over the office administration to daughter Brandy, 25. Brandy's son, Collin, pedals around the office on a toy tractor, anxious for the day his legs are long enough to reach the pedals on a real one. Family is what farming is all about, according to Jackie.

"It's not just a living, it's our soul," he says. "My ancestors risked everything they had to build that ship for our family; I'm determined to keep it afloat."

The concept of a healthy family farm is important to Jackie. While his 3,300-acre cane farm may seem larger than the typical family farm, Jackie resists such labels.

"It troubles me when people put emphasis on size in agriculture, as if a 3,300-acre farm is not a family farm," he says. "A 10-acre vegetable farm is large, but 500 acres is a small sugar cane farm. If a farm has been in a family for generations and the day-to-day decisions are made by family members, then it's a family farm regardless of size." The farm employs and supports Jackie and Rochelle — plus their three adult children.

### Focal Point of Operation—Soil-building

Jackie started his search for solutions at a conference he read about in *ACRES USA*. There, he met some Mennonite farmers who talked about compost, calcium-magnesium ratios and other things he'd never heard of. He asked questions, bought books and brought consultants back to the farm.

“Right off, I found out our cane was starving for calcium,” he says of the turning point in their farm practices. “Now I know that a healthy ratio is about 70 percent calcium and 10-20 percent magnesium. Ours was 50-50 in some places. Calcium should be king instead of a minor element.”

Treatment began with two tons of lime applied to every acre that first year. The food-grade calcium, a by-product of sugar refining, was free but cost \$10 per ton to truck it from Chalmette, making it a \$40,000 investment. They now get calcium closer to home, where it is a waste by-product of the New Iberia water treatment plant.

Another major change was to plant soybeans on the fallow cane land each year. Today, the mid-summer bean canopy on 25 percent of Northside Planting looks natural, but it was not common practice seven years ago when fallow cane land was cultivated to a powder for weed control. At \$4.50 a bushel, there isn't much profit, but the beans pay for themselves and help with cash flow at cane planting time. After harvest, the bean vines are plowed under for on-the-spot composting, reducing the need for high rates of nitrogen that used to be applied every year.

The Judices changed still other practices after Jackie read more books, such as *Hands On Agronomy* by Neal Kinsey.

“I found out that bottom plowing churns the anaerobic soil zone into the aerobic



Sandy Romero

*Chad and Jackie Judice have cut fertilizer expenses by \$40 an acre with no reduction in sugar cane yield.*

zone and disturbs the microbial life,” he says, counting the lessons on his fingers. “Now we practice minimum tillage. I learned that potassium chloride, our former source of potassium, is the same poison used for lethal injections in humans. Now we use potassium carbonate or potassium sulfate, which builds rather than destroys microbial life. Our traditional phosphorus source was triple super phosphate, which locks up with the soil after a short time so plants can't use it. We now use mono-ammonium phosphate, which is more hospitable to soil life.”

Switching to new, longer-lived cane varieties allows a fourth and fifth year cutting from a single planting, giving the soil and the checkbook even more relief.

### Economics and Profitability

Those investments have paid off in terms of soil health and profitability. Before the transition, Northside Planting was spending \$70-80 per acre on fertilizer. This year, the Judices reduced fertilizer expenses to \$40

per acre to compensate for depressed sugar prices. Yield did not drop, and Jackie and his sons now plan to cut fertilizer applications by another \$10 per acre next year, for a farm-wide savings of \$24,000. Even with cost-cutting measures, yields have increased from about 5,000 pounds of raw sugar per acre before the transition to an average of 8,500 pounds per acre in 1999.

The investments matured just in time. A loophole in NAFTA has allowed a Canadian company to import and extract sugar from molasses arriving from Cuba and Mexico. The effect has been a 25-percent drop in American sugar prices.

“It's as if you worked for 20 years without a raise, and then your boss tells you there will be a 25-percent pay cut,” explains Jackie. “It was bad enough that sugar prices stayed the same while the cost of diesel, insurance and everything else was increasing. Now with the cut, only the most efficient sugar cane farms will survive.”

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### Environmental Benefits

Northside Planting has been a leader in cleaning up cane farmers' reputations for heavy tillage, reliance on fertilizers and pesticides, and burning of fields to remove leaves from harvested cane. (Farmers are penalized if leaves are not removed from stalks before the cane arrives at the mill for processing.) The old method in Louisiana was to harvest the entire cane plant, stack them into "heap" piles every few rows and burn them to remove leaves before loading cane stalks onto wagons.

In 1995, the Judices were among the first Louisiana farmers to adopt an Australian harvesting method that eliminates burning. The cane is combined as eight-inch segments, and the leaves are stripped right in the furrow for mulch. The mulch reduces soil runoff, protects new cane shoots and prevents weed growth. Now that the Australian practice is spreading, air will be much cleaner over sugar cane communities.

Only occasionally, when it's too wet to run their equipment cost-effectively, the Judices burn the cane leaves in the field.

Other environmental benefits of Northside Planting's system include reduced erosion on the fallow fields now planted with soybeans. Duckweed, a water purifier, grows naturally in the borrow pits (craters left after earth was taken for levee building along the Atchafalaya River) into which the fields drain before flowing into the Atchafalaya Swamp. The duckweed filters out any excess nutrients from the cane fields.

Using a SARE grant, Jackie helped develop a machine that precisely applies smaller amounts of pesticide and reduces drift. For these combined efforts he was awarded the 1996 Environmental Leadership Award by the Iberia Parish Citizens Recycling and Environmental Advisory Council.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Some things have not changed for the Judices. Just as the farm is the soul of the family, the family is the heart of the community, according to Jackie. Sometimes it's difficult to determine where family ends and community begins.

"A family farm gives life to the community," says Jackie. "Not just in the number of employees it hires this year, but in the stability and continuity it brings. The fathers of some of my current employees worked for my father and their sons will work for my sons."

That continuity affects more than working relationships. The Judices plant watermelons, okra and sweet corn for family and friends to harvest, but even with the specter of falling sugar prices, they will not diversify by growing vegetables commercially.

"What do you think would happen to the smaller farms around here that sell sweet corn if the Judices suddenly went into that market?" Jackie explains with a shrug.

When a farm worker was killed in an auto accident, Jackie organized a benefit for the widow. He transformed two hogs into pork etoufee served with white beans, rice and smothered potatoes. They raised more than \$4,000 toward medical expenses and provided an opportunity for the entire community to show support for the family.

In May 1999, Jackie's community commitment went a step farther when he joined several other local businessmen to found Community First, the area's only locally owned bank. The bank's holdings topped \$30 million on its first anniversary, nearly doubling the projected \$18 million for the 12-month mark. Jackie considers the bank's success an indicator of how well it fills a need.

"It's also a good example of how people will support endeavors born in and of their community," he says. "Whether it's a farm or a bank, there's an element of pride and trust that's missing when people who live in Chicago or somewhere just set up shop in your neighborhood."

### Transition Advice

The first piece of advice Jackie offers is to remember that calcium is king. Conduct soil tests every year that include the minor elements and CEC measurements.

Take advantage of inexpensive or free local waste products for composting. Besides calcium from the water treatment plant, Northside Planting has used duckweed, shrimp heads, manure from the ag arena, bagasse (cellulose remaining after the juice has been squeezed from cane) and boiler ash from sugar mills. Jackie will be looking into the local zoo as a resource and has even experimented with harvesting the water hyacinth that clogs Bayou Teche.

### The Future

No more major changes are planned at this time. Northside Planting will continue building the soil with local amendments and reducing inputs whenever possible. For now, it appears that the changes already made on Jackie's watch should preserve the Judice cane-raising tradition for the next 200 years.

■ *Gwen Roland*

### For more information:

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