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Cane harvest on home stretch

Queensland's 2023 sugarcane harvest has finally hit the halfway mark with over 50% of the estimated 30.1 million tonne crop now cut and crushed at the state's 19 sugar mills.

Rain early in the season, combined with below par mill performance, had delayed the crush in some districts, but the long expected El Nino has brought ideal harvesting conditions, enabling many districts to make up ground in recent weeks.

Tableland district, which kicked off this year's crush on 21 May, is now on the home stretch, as is Bundaberg, with both districts having crushed more than 75% of their crop.

Meanwhile Burdekin, Queensland's biggest cane growing region, has crushed around 65% of its estimated 8.2 million tonne crop.

Some regions such as Innisfail and Plane Creek are yet to hit the halfway mark, however, while the problem-plagued Rocky Point district is struggling to get its season up and running.

"It's a bit of a mixed bag across the industry," CANEGROWERS Chairman Owen Menkens said.

"After falling behind early in the season, the dry weather has helped us make up ground and, if the weather holds and the mills perform as they should, we're expecting most districts will finish crushing in late-November or early-December.

"There are a few mill areas, however, where crushing is likely to continue into the Christmas curfew period. Rocky Point in particular is really struggling due to ongoing problems with the mill's co-generation plant. It's an infuriating and frustrating situation for growers in the district, and sadly it seems to be a perennial problem."

On a positive note, Mr Menkens said 40% of Queensland's cane-growing area is now accredited in the industry-led, and government-funded, best management practice program, Smartcane BMP.

"This is a real success story of the industry, especially when you consider that the uptake of similar programs in other Australian ag sectors is significantly lower, often not even in the double digits.

"Smartcane BMP is recognised by global sugar sustainability gatekeepers Bonsucro, ProTerra and VIVE as meeting their sustainability criteria. That means 40% of the raw sugar exported from Australia is certified as sustainably produced.

“This is a huge selling point for Queensland sugar at a time when consumers are actively seeking out sustainable products.”

Mr Menkens said growers are putting a lot of time, money, and effort into proving their sustainability credentials, and CANEGROWERS has worked with KPMG to develop a blockchain platform that can trace sustainably grown sugarcane from the paddock to the packet.

The onus is now on sugar marketers to do their part and make sure growers receive the true value of their product, he said.

“For several years CANEGROWERS has encouraged growers to become certified, not simply to improve their farming systems and increase the efficiency, productivity, and profitability of their businesses, but also on the promise that accreditation would one day attract a premium for their sugar.

“It has taken a lot of time and effort, but we are finally on the cusp of realising that goal, as the recent shipment of sustainably grown sugar to the UK proves.

“The government is playing its part, opening new markets for Australian sugar, and the growers are certainly doing their bit, adopting sustainable farming practices and seeking Smartcane BMP certification.

“But if we want to build on the momentum of the Smartcane BMP program and revitalise the industry through diversification, for the benefit of the entire supply chain and the communities in which we operate, then growers must be recognised and rewarded for their efforts.”

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