



CANEGROWERS



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Christmas Crushed: Delays take heavy toll on farming families

Queensland's sugarcane farming families will spend this Christmas counting the cost of yet another delayed harvest, with updated industry analysis finding that poor milling performance throughout the year that has caused crushing to continue into the wet season could cost growers over one-hundred million dollars in 2024.

The analysis by CANEGROWERS has revealed that as of 14 December more than 1.8 million tonnes of cane, worth a staggering \$179 million, remained unharvested across Queensland.

"Some mills are still crushing, so it's too early to tell how many tonnes will remain unharvested when the season finally ends, but that could happen any day given the continuing wet weather we're experiencing across the state," CANEGROWERS Chairman Owen Menkens said.

"What's clear is that growers and harvesting contractors are going to take a huge financial hit this year due to delays that they have no control over."

The challenges are compounded by the downstream effects of standover cane and late-harvested ratoons, which threaten to erode grower profits well into 2025.

While mills also face financial setbacks from the extended crush, growers bear the lion's share of costs, Mr Menkens said.

"As the crush drags past mid-November, rising temperatures and the onset of the rainy season create a triple blow – reduced sugar content in the cane, higher harvesting costs, and damage to wet paddocks, which require expensive remediation."

The disparity in financial losses is stark.

"Obviously mills lose out too, but of that \$179 million, the cost to growers and harvesting contractors is \$115 million, so the growing sector is by far the hardest hit," Mr Menkens said.

"We're not supposed to be harvesting at this time of year, it's as simple as that, and farmers are frustrated by the situation, which many feel is preventable.

"This frustration is reflected in tension across the industry, but arguments alone won't solve the issue."

Underlying these delays are systemic problems. Queensland's sugar mills, many of which are ageing, urgently require significant investment to meet modern standards.

Workforce shortages compound the issue, with mill workers, harvester operators, and truck drivers in short supply.

Mr Menkens emphasised the need for unity and transparency to overcome these challenges.

“The future of our industry hinges on collaboration. Fixing systemic issues requires growers, millers, and government to work together, but we also need transparency.

“Every year the milling sector tells us the vast sums that they spend on maintenance and capital expenditure, but we don’t actually know what the true cost of bringing our mills up to speed might be.

“Spending \$40-\$50 million on capex sounds impressive, but if the true cost is \$100 million then suddenly it doesn’t seem like nearly enough. So, transparency is essential.”

While historical tensions and mistrust between growers and millers persist, the industry’s survival depends on building trust and working toward shared goals, Mr Menkens said.

“Confidence to spur capital investment, shared strategic planning, and workforce development must be priorities.”

“It’s time to move beyond blame and focus on solutions. With cooperation, we can realign our seasons and position Queensland’s sugarcane industry for a stronger future.”