

Burdekin region

As I sit to compile the last report for the 2014 season, rain that stopped as suddenly as it started has fallen to lay the dust and little more. The smell of fresh rain on the breeze is the smell of hope for most of rural Australians battling drought. Let's pray we all see some rain relief in sight across the country.

The final stick of cane was processed through Pioneer mill on Wednesday 25th November, with harvesting and crushing at the other Burdekin mills being completed as follows:

Invicta's season ended on Thursday 20th November, Kalamia on Friday 21st November and Inkerman celebrated the end of its 100th year of crushing on Sunday 23rd November.

Wilmar Sugar Operations General Manager, Mike McLeod, advised a total of about 8.06 million tonnes of cane was crushed for the season. "The final crop was better than our pre-season estimate and about 770,000 tonnes more cane than last year's total," he said. "The mills have generally performed well and we had a good run with weather, after some rain stops in the first half of the season. "We thank all growers, harvesting contractors and our employees for their efforts throughout the year."

Mr McLeod said that, based on early estimates, next year's crop would be bigger again, with more than 8.2 million tonnes expected. "It's good to see Burdekin crops returning to totals of more than eight million tonnes," he said. "Hopefully there will be favourable weather during the critical growing period in the coming months. "Rain in the next few weeks would provide growers with some much-needed respite from irrigating in the lead up to Christmas."

Comparative production figures for the Burdekin mills (2013/2014) are tabled below, compiled by Steve Postma, WILMAR. The 2014 figures are provisional as the season has just concluded.

		INV	PNR	KAL	INK	Total
Tonnes Cane	2014	3,059,379	1,747,400	1,495,673	1,758,925	8,061,377
	2013	2,547,957	1,575,754	1,487,499	1,681,644	7,294,867
CCS	2014	14.8	14.8	14.4	14.7	14.7
	2013	14.6	14.7	14.6	14.7	14.6
Tonnes Sugar	2014	443,000	256,000	218,000	257,000	1,174,000
	2013	368,000	230,000	220,000	247,000	1,065,000
Tonnes Molasses	2014	95,500	54,900	43,700	57,000	251,100
	2013	71,900	45,500	38,000	51,300	206,700
Fibre %	2014	16.1	15.9	16.5	16.1	16.1
	2013	15.3	15.4	16.0	15.5	15.5
Crush Rate TPH	2014	988	519	465	531	2,503
	2013	975	528	480	545	2,528
Planned Stops (days)	2014	4.6	4.0	3.1	3.3	3.9
	2013	3.2	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1
Total Availability %	2014	88	92	89	93	90
	2013	87	93	92	91	90

Wilmar has contacted all growers regarding the marketing and forward pricing of their sugar for the 2017 season, despite significant disquiet in the district over their refusal to include QSL as a pricing option for growers. The matter has been taken up with the federal government, by ACFA and

Canegrowers jointly, and a Senate Inquiry into sugar marketing arrangements is underway. All groups have submitted to the government enquiry being held.

The ACCC is also investigating the Wilmar pricing and marketing proposals and it is difficult to see how an argument could be justified for failing to allow growers the option to price through QSL, under so-called 'competition policies'. The sad reality is that successive governments have handed the mills all power through deregulation, expecting the growers to shoulder any risk and the consequences are now destroying the framework of the sugar industry.

The last of the season's Harvest management group meetings was held on 2nd December. The group have addressed numerous issues, including safety and transport concerns during the season. Unfortunately, a concerning omission from recent meetings have been the QSL staff, which does not bode well for the transparency that Wilmar intends to pursue in the coming years.

Aside from the continuing serious issues between the state government and the local industry regarding electricity and water pricing, SunWater remains inflexible and illogical with their scheduling for channel shutdowns, choosing maximum usage periods to shut down water supply for treatments, instead of acting immediately after a rain event.

I attended the recent SRA conference in Townsville recently and was disappointed to hear much that has been heard before: nothing on Yellow Cane Syndrome, smut, or advances in alternatives to chemicals or chemical fertilisers. The industry needs to encourage the many innovative farmers who receive little recognition for thinking outside of the box and seeking alternatives to the traditional or recycled practices, where it is practical to do so. Researchers need to give more credit to the farmer's knowledge of his own farm and finances when raising expectations for their research to be adopted on farm. The increasingly limited revenues on cane farms and the higher ratio of work expectation for each farmer to achieve, makes it essential for conferences to contain relevant and new presentations, not jaded rhetoric about 'old' farmers. It is long past time that respect for those who have built the industry was inherent in ALL our present efforts, especially as the results of recent decades have shown little but destruction of all pillars of the industry and especially the position of the family farm in it.

Pricing of essential services and rates, etc. for the local growers remain a serious concern and a recent meeting with state Ministers McVeigh MP, McArdle MP and member for Burdekin, Rosemary Menkins MP, should have clarified for these public servants the level of dismay at current government charges, policy and direction.

At the time of writing, Federal Minister for Agricultural, Hon Barnaby Joyce MP and local member, George Christensen MP were scheduled to host a meeting on 10th December (12:00pm to 1pm), at the Ayr Showgrounds Hall.

I will be attending a rural debt meeting in Winton on 5th December, to discuss the extent of rural indebtedness and the inequitable effects of government policy on the rural economy and families. If state and federal parliaments fail to address the consequences of their policies, this nation will ultimately face collapse from the farm gate, upwards through the economy. We have already seen the cracks in the economic landscape and governments need to do more than declare the fall out of policies as 'collateral damage'. Farming families are being isolated by geography, by economic circumstances and by government and media assault. The blame needs to be laid squarely at the feet of government policy, which at every level, has created government cost burdens that make cane farming unviable in productive, irrigation areas.

With a state election in the near future, it is time Queensland farmers stood together and declared 'enough' to government and opposition alike...time to take a leaf out of the French farmers' manual lock arms and refuse to see our nation's backbone destroyed.

As this is the last of my monthly reports for 2014, I wish for each and every one of you, a peaceful and happy Christmas, a safe and prosperous outcome for all in the New Year and every blessing on you and all those you love.

Furthermore, the 'asset sale' debate in both the federal and state parliaments confirms the serious disconnect between what governments are promising and what they are actually delivering or even whether they are aware of the problems their policies are creating. The relentless government promotion of corporate farming and support for foreign takeovers of most of the industry infrastructure, milling and refining interests has failed in every respect. There have been no benefits to the industry, the regions or the nation, quite the contrary.

Burdekin Shire council rates, already 3 to 4 times the cost/ha of other rates being charged to cane farmers across the industry, have risen again this year.

All of these, including exorbitant water and electricity prices are serving to ensure that the Burdekin cane farmers continue to face the highest overall growing costs in the industry. Representations have been made from all areas of the sugar industry, to both state and federal governments to address the effects of damaging agricultural policies and charges.

Feral Pig Eradication Program – Burdekin Productivity Services:

As the crushing draws to a close, it is a perfect time to consider a feral pig eradication program. Dry weather causes a scarcity of food. When this is combined with less cane cover (to seek refuge in), an ideal scenario evolves for seeking out and destroying feral pigs. Feral pigs are a major pest to our industry, damaging hundreds of hectares of cane each year. This translates into thousands of dollars in lost revenue to the industry and the community. Data collected from the 2013 crop survey showed around 4,200 Ha of cane area was in some way, affected by pigs, resulting in an estimated loss of 13,400 tonnes of cane. This equates to over \$500,000 in lost farm income.

BPS want to surpass last year's count of over 350 pigs killed through a series of professional aerial shoots. Once again, this year they will be conducting shoots after the end of the crush, aimed at targeting areas of high infestation. Burdekin Shire Council is also providing a baiting program and Wetland Care Australia will fund a concentrated trapping program in the Barratta region. The primary aim of this coordinated approach to the feral pig problem, is to reduce the population over the longer term.

BPS has funding available to assist groups of 3 or more landholders with coordinated aerial pig shooting in high pressure areas. Up to \$750, in the form of a 50% subsidy, can be accessed by forming a small grower group amongst neighbouring property owners, to engage in a professional aerial pig shoot. Please contact Mark Rickards on 0427 834 800 or your field officer if you want to benefit from this pig shooting subsidy.

Regards,

Margaret Menzel
Burdekin Director