

MEDIA RELEASE

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FSC encouraged by progress ahead of the cane crop for 2018

Cane planting in the 2017 season has seen a very positive improvement in achievements of cane growers and the FSC's Extension Team engagement with the grower community. This is encouraging news for the sugar industry, as a higher cane crop will result in an increase in sugar production.

FSC CEO Graham Clark says "we are encouraged and optimistic by the current planting trend. We are also very grateful to all industry stakeholders, notably Government for their financial support. The objective of re-building a robust and bigger sugar industry has clearly been accepted from all stakeholders. Everyone is working together and at this juncture, this is crucial and rewarding".

All sectors have achieved, and are projecting growth in their planting efforts. Even some nil producing growers have started to replant sugar cane. This new wave of optimism has been welcomed by FSC. "There is a spirit of excitement and renewed enthusiasm in the air!" Clark said.

Two growers within the Lautoka sector interviewed both confirmed that this year's planting has been better than the previous year. This aided by the government grants and good technical support from another key industry stakeholder, the Sugar Research Institute.

Rajnesh Naicker, a 39 year old commercial grower of Lovu sector, on the outskirts of Lautoka, is hoping to increase his harvest this season. "Last season, I had 4.5 acres covered by cane, this season, that has grown to 7-acres and I am looking forward to at least 500 tonnes of sugar harvest this year".

The Fiji Government assistance to the growers this season has been fundamental in assisting grower planting efforts.

As Naicker says "incentives from government and support from FSC field operations, complemented with good technical advise from the Sugar Research Institute has assisted me greatly".



Above: Rajnesh Naicker of Luvu, Lautoka, explains of the success of inter-cropping, his sugar cane farm seen here with legumes.

He goes onto say, "I am new to farming and I learn as much as I can. And the direction being given to me by these entities has really boosted my cane planting efforts". Naicker, an accountant by profession left a lucrative career to pursue commercial agricultural farming. "I have no regrets in pursuing sugar cane farming", he ended.

Government assistance to the sugar cane growers also comes in the form of incentives for weedicides and fertilizer. The response to these initiatives has seen significant increases in volume usage of both fertilizer and weedicide. FSC planting records confirm noteworthy growth in all sectors with over 5,800 hectares planted in November and December 2017 alone. In Ba, Tavua and Rarawai, several sectors have increased planting area by more than double compared to last year.



This season has also had the advantage of good rainfall at the right time, throughout the cane belt. The rains have enhanced cane growth prospects. Extreme weather patterns in the last three to five years have had a negative bearing on the crop, but this season, the rainfall has bolstered growers' determination.

Lisala Kubu, an iTaukei grower of the village Naviago, Lautoka owns a 3.9 acre sugar farm. He started farming again after a few years lapse. Kubu says "I was motivated by the incentives in the industry and I am happy that I ventured into cane farming again. I started off with a 1.4 acre farm but now I have close to 4 acres and I am still looking to add 3 more acres. My father was a sugar cane farmer but I've only just taken it up in 2015".

Like Naicker, Kubu is also looking forward to a good harvest this season.

Left: Lisala Kubu standing at his sugar cane farm in Naviago, Lautoka.

Comparisons to last season, sugar cane planting is above target by 136% for sectors aligned to the Rarawai Mill. Sectors aligned to Lautoka Mill have achieved 76% of target to date, Labasa Mill sectors 86.2% and Penang Mill 72% respectively. Of the thirty eight sectors, 15 sectors have doubled their planting targets. This is a positive direction for the future of the industry and just general good news all around. Whilst planting for the 2018 season has been concluded, planting for new seed cane for use in 2019 continues.

Barring any extreme weather disturbances, this season's crop should see a much needed increase in cane production compared to the previous season, and will contribute toward much-anticipated stability required to deliver a turnaround for the sugar industry.

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