

MEDIA RELEASE

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FSC advises against sugar cane burning

The burning of sugar cane, is detrimental to the sugar industry and to the environment. Although it may be argued that this practice brings some short term benefits, in terms of shortening harvest times, in the longer term, this is a practice that according to FSC, should not be encouraged.

From a milling perspective, burning of cane should not be encouraged as with extended delivery times, it impacts the quality of sugar produced ultimately reducing the premium prices that Fiji is able to earn on its sugar exports.



FSC CEO Graham Clark says, “the reason we don’t encourage burning is because when burnt cane is harvested it deteriorates quickly and stimulates the conversion of sugar content (sucrose) into destructive compounds such as *dextran* and *methanol*, which adversely affects sugar recovery (TCTS) and sugar quality from the factory”.

The presence of these destructive compounds is penalised by international buyers of sugar, whereas sugar supplied free of these compounds attracts premium prices. It is possible to remove these during the sugar manufacturing process by chemical dosing, but this is an expensive process adding to costs of production, which cannot be fully recovered from the sugar sales price.

“Sugarcane burning also has a negative impact on the environment and public hygiene in areas downwind of fields”, Clark adds.

Sugar cane burning contributes to particulate matter pollution, which is spread by the wind. The associated ash and debris takes time to break down and remains an environmental pollution factor, long after a cane fire.

Sugar cane burning in Fiji is often driven by malicious intent, and this can have major financial consequences.

Out of season cane fires when the mills are not crushing result in the total loss of the crop, whilst the burning of immature cane, results in yield loss to farmers. When burnt cane is notified to FSC, it may be accepted for crushing if the delivery mill is operating, but as stipulated in the Sugar Industry Tribunal Master Award, the mill has the discretion to reject burnt cane after seven days. If accepted for crushing within seven days, a burnt cane penalty is charged 24 hours after burning. The result could be a maximum loss of 17% of the first delivery payment for cane burnt and delivered six days after burning.

Green cane harvesting is a good farming practice, widely adopted internationally with proven crop and soil subtracts analysis.

The increased use of mechanical harvesters provides an opportunity for more green cane harvesting in Fiji.

An added benefit of mechanical harvesting, is that cane leaves (trash) are removed in the mechanical harvesting process and separated from the harvested cane. The trash is blown by fan, operated from the harvester onto the field being cut, providing a blanket over the remaining roots. This process allows moisture to be retained and prevents or least slows weed growth. The added organic matter from the cane trash also improves soil health when incorporated after harvesting.



All things considered, cane burning is a practice to be discouraged, as the benefits of green cane harvesting far outweigh those that might result from the burning of cane.

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