

CANEGROWERS' Position on Water Quality and Wetlands

H. Bonanno

Chairman, CANEGROWERS, GPO Box 1032, Brisbane Qld 4001

I'm pleased to be here today to have an opportunity to speak on behalf of the sugar industry. The sugar industry is a high profile industry and as such it's a prime target for a lot of criticism. That won't dismay us. I'm very proud of the industry and I think that most of you already are, or should be, very proud of the sugar industry we have in Australia. We earn something like two billion dollars per annum and that's not to be taken lightly. Not many industries in Australia earn that much money. Actually it's the highest earning rural industry in Queensland, and it's about the fifth largest industry in Australia as far as earning capability. Certainly our farmers as well are proud of what we do and are very efficient producers. They produce without any subsidy from anyone, without any compensation from anyone and no tariff from now on either. And yet other industries around the world are protected. In Australia there are substantial industries that are protected, yet we get most of the criticism. I hear now they say user pays should be spread all around. I say all beneficiaries should pay. And the people that benefit are the general community in Australia and Queensland. You should all be contributing towards it if there are any real problems. It's easy to say that users should pay, the beneficiaries should pay. And most of Australia is the beneficiary to the sugar industry. We've always worked within the laws of the land, whatever they are. We have not transgressed any laws that I know of but anyone who does should be adequately punished. We work within our communities and we hold our heads high within our communities; we are part of these communities. We are trying to meet the community expectations. If we don't, we want to hear about it and discuss it in a reasonable and rational way. A rational way doesn't appear to be to have about 80 people here and about three or four cane growers. It was the most inappropriate time you could have picked to hold this particular meeting. That won't stop us, we'll have our say and I'm pleased to.

I don't run the sugar industry; I'm chairman of it; I'm not without influence. But the industry runs in a democratic way. We work within the laws of the land and we work within the programs we have set out and we plan where we're going. There's nothing that is done ad hoc and I get rather dismayed when we're accused of all the irrational things we might do. They might appear to be irrational on the surface to some people who haven't scratched deep enough to find out why it was really done that way. The industry has expanded some 20% in the last 10 years. I make no apology for that. Our governments, both State and Federal, say, get out there and earn an income. You won't buy anything if you don't earn money and we are one of the industries that earn money for this country. So it's easy to knock industries but it's better if you look on the good side and show what the industry has done for Australia.

We don't necessarily want to expand. If we're asked to, we will. Unless there's some good reason why we shouldn't, we will continue to expand. The main constraint is now milling capacity. We can't mill the cane quickly enough to get it off the land for the farmers at a reasonable price. So there's a major constraint and unless the rural market price increases you'll probably see no expansion and the losers then will be the rural cities and towns of Queensland. The farmers will also lose. It's given a lot of people the opportunity to be farmers and strangely enough there are a lot of people who want to be farmers. I don't know whatever for. It gives you a permanent job; you get criticised for everything that goes wrong with the whole country and yet you're working probably twice as long as most other people but you have a permanent job for life. You either go bankrupt or leave the farm, whatever comes first I suppose, but you keep on going. It must be what people really want in this country and we welcome people into the industry.

CANEGROWERS recognise that wetlands are an invaluable resource. Wetlands support a diversity of wildlife including migratory bird species, are an important part of the natural hydrological cycle, provide water passage and storage and may contribute to the recharge of aquifers. In addition, wetlands remove nutrients and intercept sediment. Wetlands also provide essential water sources for agricultural, urban and industrial uses and vital breeding, nursery and harvest sites for edible fish and crustaceans.

I think we all agree on the benefits of wetlands. All cane growers recognise that they farm in the shadow of an Australian icon, the Great Barrier Reef. And only through the long term and careful management of the land and all of its resources will we maintain our quality of life and that of future generations. We have to manage carefully where we're going in the future.

However, CANEGROWERS also recognise that environmental issues transcend farm boundaries. Environmental impacts may be accumulative and are often realised far from the impact source. Clever management of our natural resource and protection of the environment can not be insured by cane growers alone. There are other rural industries and there is real effluent produced by many cities along the Queensland coast. CANEGROWERS recognise that the protection of wetlands and the rest of the environment will require a clever and strategic approach involving many stakeholders.

The sugar industry extends over 500 000 hectares of land and even though it is strategically placed along our coastline, it is not the major cultivator of the Queensland lands. However, the Queensland sugar industry is Queensland's largest income earner, as I said earlier. The sugar industry is the first, and as far as I know the only, rural industry in northern Queensland to have a comprehensive and independent audit of its industry undertaken. We did that voluntarily. I stress that the audit was undertaken by independent consultants, Gutteridge Haskins and Davey Pty Ltd, who consulted with all stakeholders including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Copies of the audit have been placed in all public libraries in cane growing regions and dispatched to the majority of stakeholders for comment. It's not a secret document.

It is clear from the document that CANEGROWERS have many environmental issues that need to be addressed. To this end, we have developed an Environmental Management Strategy. This strategy covers four areas:

1. improved agriculture practices to reduce off-farm impacts and ensure the efficient and sustainable use of all of our natural resources;
2. to achieve a balance between cane growing and the protection of natural systems ;
3. for responsible and appropriate use, storage and disposal of dangerous goods and wastes; and
4. increasing the level of communication to ensure that partnership exists among different organisations to develop programs directed at maintaining a profitable, sustainable, environmentally aware cane growing industry.

CANEGROWERS is prepared to work with various stakeholders for improved outputs. I'll give you that undertaking. There are a lot of issues where there must be consultation. CANEGROWERS is now developing a 'whole of industry' approach to all of the recommendations in the audit for the Environmental Management Strategy. A meeting is planned and a working group from the CRC for Sustainable Sugar Production is addressing outstanding issues from our guidelines for sustainable cane growing. CANEGROWERS are consulting with the Department of Environment and will ultimately seek the Department of Environment's endorsement of these guidelines.

CANEGROWERS Environment Manager, Jennifer Marohasy, is keen to include all genuinely interested groups in the development of action plans to achieve the many outcomes listed in our Environment Management Plan.

The time has come for all stakeholders to begin working together through consultative processes. CANEGROWERS believes we have shown leadership in this area. The Tully-Murray Water Management Scheme, which is part of the sugar infrastructure package, provides for the construction of lagoons, provisions of silt traps to reduce off-farm impacts, conservation of heritage areas along rivers and streams and the replanting of some riparian areas. The scheme will also complement fish restocking societies in their efforts to boost fish numbers for recreation and commercial fishing. Furthermore this package includes a comprehensive nutrient and sediment monitoring program to ensure that the aims of this scheme are realised.

CANEGROWERS is committed to working with all genuinely interested parties. An outline of CANEGROWERS' Environmental Management Strategy was presented to the Downstream Effects of Agricultural Production (DEAP committee) meeting in late August 1997. The intention was to force links and to ensure compatibility between CANEGROWERS' environment initiatives and those of other organisations. One of the key issues identified in the DEAP 1995-1998 Strategic Plan is the need to:

locate sampling sites so that rural land-use practices (e.g. grazing, dairying, other intensive animal industries, cropping, horticulture, cane) are represented and linked to water quality and the biological health of river catchments.

Recommendation number 2 item 4 of the Gutteridge, Haskins and Davey audit recommends Increase monitoring to water quality in local creeks and waterways in order to determine cane growing effects on nitrification, sedimentation, turbidity and salinity of water resources.

Cane growers are involved through landcare groups and are independently monitoring water quality through Waterwatch. There is obviously a need to establish an appropriate balance between these types of rapid qualitative water quality monitoring projects and slower more expensive quantitative monitoring of the sort being undertaken by a variety of agencies. All of the published information suggests that, in terms of off-farm impacts, cane growing is relatively friendly. Indeed, measurements of sediment loss from fields with green cane trash blankets indicate that levels are similar to natural level of erosion measured in undisturbed rainforest at approximately five tonnes per hectare annual average loss. Under our previous cultivations the losses ranged from 70 tonne to 500 tonnes per hectare, so that's totality brought down to a minimilistic level.

I'd like to see the long-term water quality trend for north Queensland creeks and rivers. Water quality has probably improved dramatically over the last decade with the move to green cane harvesting and trash blanketing. Over 60% of north Queensland cane production is now being harvested green. Some northern areas are close to 100% green cane harvesting. Many cane growers feel that the community is generally always treating them as the bad guys. They never recognise the many positive issues coming from primary producers. What about acknowledging the considerable contribution of primary producers to sustainable agriculture, and the fostering of biodiversity? The Decade of Landcare evaluation report estimates that individual primary producers spend nearly \$300 million a year protecting and rehabilitating the rural environment, an average of around \$2500 per grower.

In fact the evaluation report of a Decade of Landcare reports that farmers spends \$4 on the rural environment for every \$1 of Federal or State Government funding. The choice of accelerated tax reduction through a tax rebate would encourage growers to engage in property management growing. I recommend that to you. The National Farmers Federation have been

calling for the eligibility details for claiming deduction rebates, or credits to be made available to our country's primary producers urgently. We are still waiting an outcome.

I commend the Department of Environment's draft strategy for the conservation and management of Queensland's wetlands. This document recognises that wetlands on leasehold and freehold land are managed by private land holders who produce goods and services in an increasingly competitive market. The Department of Environment document recognises that these wetlands makes a significant contribution to wildlife abundance and wealth, particularly in times of drought. The document also recognises the importance of artificial wetlands and indicates that these storages can be managed for their primary productive purpose while providing habitat and recreation values.

I ask the government Ministers and representatives here today to assist cane growers in a practical way by putting in place a mechanism which provides a 150% tax deduction for construction of wetlands and lagoons on cane farms. Incentives for farm management and environmental protection are building blocks in which we have major encouragement for more sustainable production within a sustainable environment.

CANEGROWERS recognise that while the adoption of green cane harvesting and trash blanketing has been a massive step towards sustainable cane growing, the construction of lagoon wetlands and silt traps will significantly reduce the potential for off-farm impacts. In order to comprehensively reduce that loss, growers need to consider better riparian management in some areas. However, there must be a mechanism to reimburse growers for positive environmental actions such as revegetating riparian zones and undertaking tree planting.

Instead, growers are hearing that with the new Integrated Planning Bill the situation will not improve and there will remain a big question about Vegetation Protection Orders, and more specifically, if compensation is payable if an Order is placed on cane land. Community groups cannot continue to point the finger at cane growers and then expect cane growers to be positive towards broader environmental objectives. The cost of environmental initiatives must be borne by all stakeholders and the broader Australian community. In all cases, the beneficiaries should pay. The general community is a major beneficiary and the Government, on behalf of the community, must accept a reasonable responsibility for contributing to a successful overall result.

We would like broad support for an industry wide project to address these issues. Our Environment Manager, Jennifer Marohasy, is keen to hear from groups with a real interest in supporting projects that look at the practical revegetation of degraded areas along waterways. Several initiatives from the sugar industry in this area were not supported through the National Heritage Trust process this year. However, one project that is likely to be funded involves the development of a mangrove nursery and the revegetation of river banks in the Moreton district. Cane growers in this region are planning to plant 10 000 mangrove trees to stabilise tidal sections of river bank.

At the same time, CANEGROWERS are fighting a continual battle with the many species of water weed, in particular species of ponded pasture, that are choking creeks, gullies, dams, and wetlands. Many of these species, including *Hymenachne*, were deliberately introduced by scientists for the grazing industry. *Hymenachne* has become established in the Tully-Murray area and is spreading through the wetlands. *Hymenachne* tends to stagnate water and reduce oxygen levels where it has become established.

I was horrified to read recently that there might be an end to the State Government's six-year ban on the introduction of new ponded pastures in north Queensland. And that this would

result in the introduction of new ponded pasture species from overseas. CANEGROWERS in this area, as well as the Burdekin and Mackay districts, will not be pleased to hear this. A Mackay cane grower recently told me he has to spray creeks, gullies and dams up to eight times a year for control of weeds like *Hymenachne* which were deliberately introduced for the grazing industry.

CANEGROWERS recognises that environmental issues transcend farm and administrative boundaries, that to maintain the quality of our environment there will need to be an appropriate mix of existing and new on-farm initiatives, as well as research, development, monitoring, extension, education and communication amongst all stakeholders. An increasing number of cane growers are developing farm plans and through Catchment Management Plans are considering planning needs to be a voluntary exercise with the farmer having a commitment to keeping to the plan and maintaining it as a living program of farm management.

CANEGROWERS recognises we have not yet solved all our problems, but we are prepared to work with the various stakeholders to maintain our quality of life and that of future generations. I invite you all to the Sugar Environment Forum being planned for 24-25 March 1998 in Mackay. The Forum will enable all interested groups to gain insight into the value of the cane industry and the daily tasks that growers carry out to produce sugar, while making efficient and sustainable use of a range of natural resources.

A cooperative and practically based program will achieve the best result in this difficult area and we as an industry have been, and will continue to be, cooperative for the benefit of our environment and our sugar industry.

I think the one comment that I haven't been able to get straightened out yet was in connection with the amount of mercury we have put into the Herbert River area in the last 40 years. The best assessment that I've been able to get (and it's not accurate and I don't want to say I've got it right) is 26 000 kilograms (not tonnes).

We are not an ad hoc industry; we believe in planning and we are happy to work with you in planning.