



Annual Joint Meeting – June 2009

President's Message – Florida Division

Barney Eiland

On behalf of the Florida Division of the American Society of Sugar Cane Technologists, I wish to thank the Louisiana Division for hosting the 39th Joint Annual Meeting at the Beau Rivage Resort in Biloxi, MS. This is the first time here for our society and I wish you all a very pleasant and memorable and very lucky stay. Second, I want to thank the Program Chair, Dr. Vadim Kochergin, for putting together an excellent program. Third, to the Florida members, I offer my sincere appreciation for the opportunity to serve as president this year. Last, to the members of the Florida Executive committee, I thank you for your commitment and hard work that makes my job easy.

It is a privilege for me to address such a distinguished group of technologists, scientists, engineers, and growers. The president's address is normally a "state of the industry" message focused on technical and production issues. The Florida industry has not had a bumper crop year since 2003/04 because of wind events, below average temperatures, and severe drought conditions during high growth periods. Four sugar mills operated during the 2008-09 crop season and ground 13,404,579 tons of cane from 380,911 acres--an average of 35.19 tons/acre. This resulted in about 1.54 million tons of 96° sugar or 4.04 tons of sugar/acre. Good years in the past produced about 2 million tons of sugar.

A quick review of the 1981 Florida's president address to which I contributed some thoughts could be appropriate today. It mentioned losing a major variety to sugarcane rust, costs of production going up, and the possibility of water and fuel inputs being limited in the future. Many items mentioned hold merit for today. A major item not anticipated in the 1981 address, but of great importance now, was the phosphorus issue in farm drainage water related to the

Everglades. This issue has resulted in the loss of significant farming acres for water storage and caused changes in farming practices.

Although my presidential message begins with the past, it is the future that I wish to address. Today as in the past, our industry faces new and daunting challenges. After the current economic slump passes and construction renews, population growth and urban sprawl will again compete with agriculture for land and water resources. The proposed plan by the State of Florida to purchase land assets of United States Sugar Corporation, if completed, will ultimately reduce the total acres available for sugar production in South Florida at some point in the future.

Last year, our past president, Fernando Llorens reported NAFTA opened the borders between the United States and Mexico on sugar traffic but that not much sugar had crossed up to that time. However by October 1, 2008, over 600,000 tons of sugar was imported from Mexico for that fiscal year. A similar amount has been imported in the 6 months since then and a million tons is expected to enter by October 1, 2009. So far the market for refined sugar has held up. Hopefully, this NAFTA sugar represents stored excess production which is being cashed out and is not replaced by sugar imports into Mexico. Ethanol production in Mexico is not encouraged by the government as the small farmers are paid for sugarcane on a sugar basis.

The 'renewable energy' concept to supply the US appetite for liquid fuel may drive American agriculture and forest products industries. Unfortunately, the input costs, harvesting and hauling costs, handling and preparation, and manufacturing costs along with profit to make a liquid fuel from biomass will set the price ceiling for a barrel of oil. OPEC demonstrated the US tolerance level of \$4+/gal lon of gasoline last summer with \$140/barrel oil which is now hovering around \$50-60/barrel with the current worldwide economic downturn. Corn ethanol production has been battered publicly and financially with many planned facilities stopped. Verenum has announced plans to break ground on a cellulosic ethanol facility in Highlands County, west of Lake Okeechobee with completion in 2011. Other ethanol facilities in the area are being planned. If the ethanol

concept from biomass is profitable, then additional cane land from the mineral soils could be lost. In general, a partial shift in agriculture from food production to fuel production has the potential to produce shortages of some food supplies and a dependence on imported food.

While these developments and others on the horizon could change our business, the primary challenge to the scientists and technologists is to continue to improve efficiency and profitability of the sugar business. Most of the easy opportunities such as automation, vertical integration, economies of scale, and cogeneration have been implemented in the Florida mills. The implication on the field side is the development of cane varieties requiring less inputs—fertilizer, water, and chemicals. The concept of changing row spacing to 5-1/2 ft in Florida is worthy of consideration since it would reduce the amount of seed required and reduce equipment passes thru the field by 10%, resulting in saved fuel and banded chemicals. The development of cane varieties which are environmentally and grower friendly will be pursued in the future. GMO's may have to be used to put certain desirable traits into superior clones. The beet and grain industries have been successful with this approach. Crop modeling should be used to provide more insight into limiting production factors especially on the shallow muck soils and mineral soils. These activities will require scientific research, engineering, and extension personnel to identify the appropriate management approaches which must be implemented.

On the research side, the Florida industry continues to leverage its investment in public research at a ratio of \$9 for each dollar invested in support from the USDA/ARS, the University of Florida and other public institutions. This is particularly important with the appearance of orange rust in Florida. We also continue to cooperate with the other cane producing states on air and water quality issues that are being debated at the national level.

As changes evolve, sugarcane technologists must continue to upgrade skills thru continuing education and training that will take our industry through the 21st century. The ASSCT has a mandate to promote this effort and to assist in providing the educational and

technological needs of our industry by means of scholarships and through direct association with our colleges and universities.

In closing, I leave you with a challenge. As cane acreage and mill numbers decline, our society is faced with reduced participation and membership. The American Society of Sugar Cane Technologists has been an integral part of my 35 years in the industry. This society is a viable part of our industry and we must keep it so. Thank you very much for your attention, I wish you a great time amongst old friends and may God bless you.