

**PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
FLORIDA DIVISION
2005 ANNUAL MEETING**

Robert A. Gilbert
University of Florida
Everglades Research and Education Center
3200 E. Palm Beach Rd.
Belle Glade, FL 33430



On behalf of the Florida division of ASSCT I would like to extend a warm welcome to all the participants of the 35th annual Joint Meeting of the American Society of Sugar Cane Technologists. I wish to thank the Louisiana Division for their hard work and preparation for this meeting. They have chosen a magnificent location in Panama City Beach which I trust you are all enjoying immensely. The program chair, Dr. Ken Gravois, has done an excellent job in preparing an outstanding program which I am certain will be enlightening for all of us.

It has been an exciting and challenging year for the state of Florida and the sugarcane industry since our last meeting at St. Petersburg Beach. The 2004-2005 crop produced 14,529,553 tons of cane, down 18% from 2003-2004. A total of 1,684,309 short tons raw value sugar was produced, representing a 22% reduction from the previous season. Clearly, sugarcane tonnage and sucrose yield declined this season, however this does not reflect poorly on the members of this society – there were extraordinary factors beyond our control.

Hurricane. The word originates from the Taino Indian word “hurakán” meaning “center of the wind”, and “Hurakan”, the ancient Mayan god of wind and storm. While anthropologists debate whether these ethnic groups considered Hurakan an evil spirit, there is no debating that the hurricane season of 2004 was unprecedented in its frequency, scope and economic impact on the state of Florida. Two of the four Florida hurricanes of 2004 struck the Everglades Agricultural Area directly: Frances wandered across on Sept.

3-4, and was followed by a meandering Jeanne a scant three weeks later. On a personal note, I was traveling south (the wrong way) from Gainesville two days before Frances hit. The site of literally hundreds of miles of evacuating northbound traffic backed-up on our freeways is one I hope never to see again in my lifetime. Unfortunately, meteorologists predict another decade of strong hurricane activity in Florida, so our friends from Louisiana may wish to invest in plywood, D-cell battery and generator stocks.

How did these hurricanes affect the sugarcane crop? While we were fortunate not to have major uprooting on many fields, the combination of wind and rain caused significant lodging and tore off or shredded the green leaves in the cane canopy – the second time from Jeanne came just as the crop was beginning to recover from Frances. This reduction in green leaf area caused the plant to use stored sugars to produce new leaf biomass and lalas (adventitious shoots). Ripener application was largely ineffective as target leaf area was low. A new crop canopy was not established until Christmas, and consistent sugar yields >12% were recorded two months later than normal. The most widely-grown cultivar in Florida, CP80-1743, was notable for its production of lalas in response to hurricane damage, which slowed its sucrose accumulation appreciably. Harvesting crews did an excellent job under challenging conditions, as they had to balance the need to cut low to reduce cane losses with the danger of sending soil and uprooted sugarcane stools to the mill. These harvesting difficulties combined with the inability to top the lodged crop then led to challenges with clarification at the mill. I believe we must regard the yield decline in 2004/2005 as a temporary phenomenon caused by our extraordinary hurricane season.

Looking back on the trail of devastating seasons which Louisiana experienced after hurricanes hit their cane fields, the Florida mills, after hurricanes Frances and Jeanne, prepared for the worst as the 2004-2005 season approached. Problems anticipated included high dextran levels as *Leuconostoc* would be carried in the high amounts of soil with the cane, and elevated starch levels as topping the lodged cane would be unrealistic. Fortunately, though, these polysaccharides decided not to rear their ugly heads, and ultimately, with the help of a dry season and moderate temperatures, Florida experienced a season with minimal dextran and starch problems. This was the case until rain and warm weather in the middle of March delayed the completion of the crop

Just as the meteorological hurricanes struck Florida this year, the sugarcane industry has been buffeted by winds of change. Concerns remain regarding the outcome of numerous trade agreements. The US trade representative website lists a total of 12 separate bilateral agreements under negotiation. The position of the Florida industry has always been to endorse free trade as long as it is on a level playing field. Negotiations should include all countries and practices under the WTO rather than piecemeal regional or bilateral frameworks. In addition to apprehension about international trade policy, local demographic shifts are a cause for concern. Urban development in the state of Florida has been surging at a record pace. At the first joint ASSCT meeting in 1970, the population of Palm Beach County stood at 348,000. Today Palm Beach County has 1.2 million inhabitants. Burgeoning population and suburban sprawl have cast a shadow of

rumors over the future of farming in the EAA. The Florida sugarcane industry employs more than 14,000 people with a total economic impact (direct and indirect effects) over \$2 billion annually. The conversion of 400,000 acres in the EAA from sugarcane agriculture to single family homes would be devastating, not only to members of this society but to anyone who values natural resources in south Florida.

On a more positive note, there were recent promising developments in sugarcane research. The addition of strong leadership both at USDA-ARS, Canal Point and EREC, Belle Glade has assured a bright future for these institutions. The future of the CP breeding program is crucial as with the closure of the CL program, it is the sole source of new cultivars for Florida. At the University of Florida, the hiring of four new scientists ensures there is now a critical mass to tackle crucial sugarcane research issues. We are thrilled to have Dr. Graham Kingston from BSES- Australia visiting at EREC for the next year to work on harvest residue management studies in sugarcane. On the research front there is a clear need for a multidisciplinary approach in tackling issues such as green cane harvest which have complex field, harvest, and milling components. The success of the participatory CP breeding program is an indication of how we all benefit from collaborative research – it is extremely difficult to make an impact working in isolation.

Not all the effects of hurricanes are negative, like many crises they often bring out the best in us. There were many reports of hitherto unknown neighbors working together to protect and clean up their communities. Similarly, we should regard the changes facing us today as an opportunity to work together more closely. Sugarcane is the agricultural crop which most closely mimics the sawgrass natural vegetation found in the EAA. Due to a combination of excellent science and diligent implementation by growers, it is possible to produce a crop while conforming to the stringent regulations on water quality and quantity required for the Everglades. The agroecological suitability of sugarcane for the EAA is particularly germane in these times of rampant increases in gas prices. At last year's ASSCT meetings we were complaining about gas prices of \$1.89/gallon in Palm Beach County – they are now (April, 2005) \$2.34/gallon. There is a tremendous potential for using the sugarcane crop for the production of value-added products such as ethanol. A collaborative proposal between research institutions and industry in Florida examining the benefits of sugarcane for ethanol production is making its way through the highly competitive USDA-NRCS grant process. While there are concerns regarding waste products involved with ethanol production, this makes it all the more imperative to work together in multidisciplinary teams to solve these issues. None of us has the individual expertise necessary to handle the unexpected crises we may face, but working together there is no challenge we can not surmount. Nine months ago, Panama City Beach was devastated by a tornado spawned from hurricane Ivan. As you can see for yourselves, the state of Florida has worked together to recover fully from the hurricane season of 2004. Let us push Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne onto the scrapheap of history. If they are remembered at all, let it be as a catalyst for increased cooperation among us.

In closing, let me once again offer my thanks to the Louisiana Division for all their hard work and gracious hospitality in planning and implementing this meeting. I look forward to a productive and educational experience for all of us.