

Field agronomist with Maryborough Cane Productivity Services, Barry Callow.



RSD vigilance a piece in the productivity jigsaw puzzle

The Australian sugarcane industry continues to work hard to minimise the impact of RSD, but it is an ongoing battle that must continue to be fought.

Sugarcane growers and millers are being reminded about the need for vigilance in monitoring and managing ratoon stunting disease (RSD).

With one of the major outcomes of RSD being yield loss, but with few other visible signs, field agronomist with Maryborough Cane Productivity Services at Maryborough, Barry Callow, said that the best way to reduce losses from RSD was to continue with the testing and most importantly the hygiene management practices widely adopted by industry.

RSD was first discovered in Mackay in 1944. Caused by a bacterium that lives in the vascular system of the cane plant, the disease restricts the plant's ability to carry nutrients and water and grow.

Due to improved diagnostics and management practices, this disease affects fewer than 5 percent of crops.

But when RSD does occur, it can cause losses as high as 60 percent. Losses are greatest when the cane is moisture stressed and even with good irrigation, losses can range from 10 to 30 percent (www.sugarresearch.com.au IS130007).

"It's an insidious disease that's very hard to spot, which is why testing and diagnosis is so important," Barry said. "It takes a lot of resources for the industry to find it, but it is crucial that the industry continues the effort to minimise it."

The impact of RSD can be minimised through good on farm hygiene and careful testing of planting material destined for use as a plant source.

He said that growers should work with their productivity services organisation to have plant sources tested to ensure that RSD was not able to be spread through a district via planting material.

Secondly, he said farm hygiene was crucial, particularly working with contractors to ensure machinery was disinfected when moving between farms and paddocks (especially planters and harvesters). Some varieties are more tolerant to RSD than others (for example, Q208[®]) and growers can plant these varieties to reduce pressure, however they **must** ensure they use a clean seed source. This is why purchasing tissue cultured plants is so important in the fight to minimise the spread of RSD. Information on the resistance ratings of different varieties is available from local productivity services, and the online variety selection tool, QCANSelect[®].

He said if growers believe they have paddocks that have RSD, they should contact their local productivity services for guidance. "RSD is of course one piece of the puzzle when it comes to productivity," Mr Callow said. "The list goes on when it comes to pests – nematodes, soldier fly, grubs – but it is a disease that we can manage and be vigilant about."