

GROWERS ENCOURAGED TO GET IN EARLY WITH PACHYMETRA SAMPLING

Sugarcane growers are being reminded to consider the crop pests and diseases that potentially could be within their paddocks, and affecting their yields, as they plan for 2020.

One of the most significant soil-borne pests of sugarcane is *Pachymetra* root rot, which can only be properly assessed with a soil sample analysis to determine its severity. The results from this soil analysis, which is a service provided by SRA through its Tully laboratory, provides growers with information on the appropriate management response.

"We encourage farmers to send their samples in to the laboratory for analysis early in the year," SRA Leader for Disease Management, Dr Rob Magarey, said. "This helps ensure that growers receive their results back with plenty of time before planting, which is crucial for helping them make decisions on what varieties to plant."

Pachymetra root rot can cause yield losses of up to 40 percent in susceptible varieties.

It is caused by a fungus-like organism and it reduces yield, causes gappy ratoon crops and can lead to an increase of soil in the cane supply.

It attacks the large primary roots of the sugarcane plant, stunting cane growth

and reducing the anchorage of the plant in the soil.

If the yield loss impacts are not severe, significant crop losses can occur without growers noticing.

"Soil borne disease is not spectacular above the ground, so *Pachymetra* is not easily identified when driving around paddocks. Often crop losses are attributed to a range of factors, such as climate, poor nutrition, waterlogging, or drought," said Dr Magarey.

"Therefore, getting a soil assay done helps you diagnose the problem and manage it.

"Without an assay – unless the problem gets very severe – you are just unaware of it, even though it's impacting your productivity and profitability."

SRA Assay Lab supervisor, Ms Laura MacGillycuddy, has seen on many occasions where soil samples were submitted to the lab and testing showed very high levels of the disease.

"Often farmers are surprised to find that they have a *Pachymetra* problem, but they didn't realise it until they tested soil from their crops," she said.

"We encourage growers to get in early in 2020 and to sample comprehensively across their fallow paddocks, which will

help them establish the best possible crop for the years ahead," she said.

"Getting in early ensures growers have their results back before the rush of sampling later in the year and that they have plenty of time to understand the results before making their planting decisions." ■



For more information on sending soil samples for analysis, growers should contact their local productivity services organisation; or Laura MacGillycuddy on T 07 4088 0712 E assaylabtully@sugarresearch.com.au

TESTING HELPS TACKLE PACHYMETRA PROBLEM

Herbert region cane grower Ian Kemp knew there was something not right with one of his blocks on his farm, with productivity steadily declining.

No matter what variety he selected for the paddock, and despite a range of improvements to his farming system that he had introduced, production was well below par.

This was about five years ago, and after a discussion with Herbert Cane Productivity Services Limited (HCP SL), he sent soil samples to the SRA Tully laboratory for analysis for *Pachymetra*.

"The tests showed that I had a serious *Pachymetra* issue," he said. "The only sign was the yield. I knew about *Pachymetra* but at that time I didn't know much about its prevalence in the district or that I had a problem."

Since then, there has been extensive work in that region – and other regions –

on tackling *Pachymetra* as a productivity constraint.

For Ian, he shifted to a resistant variety and said that the result was a notable improvement in yield – as much as 30 tonnes of cane per hectare.

Five years later, he now regularly sends samples to the Tully assay lab for analysis and has identified other hotspots on his farm.

"The key issue is getting suitable *Pachymetra* resistant varieties," Ian said. "Some of the new ones look promising but also needed to be tested on my farm. Last year I chased down SRA14 and I will also have a look at the new variety WSRA24."

He said that there was a growing awareness in the grower community of *Pachymetra* as an issue.

"There is plenty of demand at the SRA end for samples, so it is good to get in early sending them off."

Ian has also been proactive in improving his farming system and soil health over the years, going back as far as being

an early adopter of green cane trash blanketing in the district in 1981.

Today, he farms on 180cm rows and grows legume crops in the fallow period. He has adopted controlled traffic, minimizes tillage through the crop cycle, uses liquid fertiliser, and also uses softer chemistry as much as possible.

He has also been involved as a paired site through a collaborative research and extension project called *Measuring soil health, setting benchmarks and driving practice change in the sugar industry*.

He said that all his changes were about maintaining viability.

"I am aiming for a long ratoon length – eight to 10 years – for profitability, which is another reason why getting on top of *Pachymetra* is a big issue for me."

(Over page) Herbert grower Ian Kemp said Pachymetra can be a sleeper issue creating significant productivity losses. (Above) Pachymetra under magnification.