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Australia

Sugar

Sugar Smut Outbreak in Queensland

2006

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Report Highlights:

For the first time, the fungal disease cane smut has been found in the state of Queensland. Eight properties in the Childers area of Queensland have been placed under quarantine to contain the spread of the disease. Nearly all of Australia's sugarcane crop is grown in Queensland and northern New South Wales. The disease could pose a significant threat to Australia's \$A2 billion sugar industry.

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For the first time, the fungal disease cane smut has been found in the state of Queensland. Eight properties in the Childers area of Queensland have been placed under quarantine to contain the spread of the disease. Nearly all of Australia's sugarcane crop is grown in Queensland and northern New South Wales. The disease could pose a significant threat to Australia's \$A2 billion sugar industry. Canegrowers General Manager Ian Ballantyne said the industry could lose up to \$A800 million over a 5-year period, if the smut spread along the 2,000 km-long cane-growing coastline.

Ian Wallace, Chief Executive Officer of sugar industry research body BSES (formerly the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations), said he believed the outbreak would have minimal effect on this year's crop, which is now being harvested. However, future crops could be seriously damaged. "This disease causes between 30 and 100 per cent crop loss," Mr. Wallace said. "The fungal spores can be spread very widely and rapidly. Just one infected plant is enough."

The outbreak has delayed crushing in the Bundaberg region while state and commonwealth officers seek to stop the spread of the disease and destroy affected crops. Farm equipment has been quarantined and other sugar regions are decontaminating equipment, during the busiest time of the year.

Agriculture Minister McGauran said the government is leading a national response to the outbreak and providing technical assistance. "Australia's Emergency Plant Response Deed has been triggered, setting in motion the formal arrangements for the Australian and State governments, together with the sugar industry, to combat this serious but controllable disease," McGauran said.

Queensland Primary Industries Minister Tim Mulherin said that compensation for losses would be covered by new federal-state arrangements to deal with exotic pests. Mr. Mulherin said guidelines drawn up by Plant Health Australia - a grouping of the federal and state governments and farming organizations - included compensation. "It is too early to speculate about amounts but the issue of compensation is specifically covered," Mr. Mulherin said. "The agreement includes the value of crops destroyed as a response to a plan which has been implemented to deal with the disease." Mr. Mulherin said the eight quarantined properties had been connected through plant and machinery movements indicating the smut was a "controlled incursion".

Sugarcane smut was detected in Western Australia in 1998 and has been managed by planting disease resistant crops. (Source: The Australian, June 20, 2006; Farmonline June 19 and previous)

Australian Sugar Production, Exports: Australian sugar production for 2006/07 is forecast at 5.18 MMT, a level below the five-year average of about 5.33 MMT. Sugar exports for 2006/07 are forecast at 3.75 MMT, down from the previous year's level. The reductions are in part due to the damage caused by the March cyclone that affected production in northern Queensland. (For further information see GAIN Report AS6023.)

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