

Posted on Mon, Oct. 16, 2006

This year's sugar cane harvest to be better than last year's

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is forecasting Florida's sugar production to come in at 1.73 million tons, up from 1.36 million tons last season.

By Susan Salisbury

The Palm Beach Post

With Florida's sugar cane harvest now underway, a sweet molasses-like aroma permeates the morning air near Clewiston.

The Florida sugar industry is hoping for a better season than last year, when Hurricane Wilma battered the crop Oct. 25. That followed a year in which hurricanes Frances and Jeanne each took their toll on the cane.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is forecasting Florida's sugar production to come in at 1.73 million tons, up from 1.36 million tons in the 2005-06 season, but lower than the 2 million-plus tons of the pre-hurricane seasons.

"We're expecting a better crop. It's still not back to normal levels," said U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez.

FLORIDA IS NO. 1

Florida produces more sugar from cane than any other state, and in a normal year, supplies 25 percent of the nation's sugar. Most of the industry's 400,000 acres lie in Palm Beach County, with some in Martin, Glades and Hendry.

Farm-level cash receipts from sugar cane totaled \$432 million in 2005, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture. That's 5 percent of Florida agriculture's total cash receipts of \$7.8 billion.

Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar Corp. began its harvest Oct. 5 and plans to harvest cane 24 hours a day, seven days a week through March. West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp. expects to start harvesting Tuesday. By early November, the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Belle Glade will join them.

Dennis Wedgworth, president of 10,000-acre Wedgworth Farms in Belle Glade and a member of the cooperative, said cane growth is better this year than the past two years. "We expect a marginally better crop than last year," he said. "It will take a few years to get out of the damaged cane."

The harvesting of each field is done according to a schedule that has to change sometimes because of wind or rain. But overall, Florida's wet summers and dry winters make it the perfect place to grow cane.

"We sprayed this field with ripener six weeks ago," Cervera said as mechanical harvesting equipment felled row after row of cane stalks.

PICTURESQUE SCENE

Nearby, hundreds of cattle egrets swooped down and devoured whatever insects were lurking in the freshly turned muck. The scene may be picturesque, but skilled workers carry out each aspect of the harvest.

It begins with fire -- workers light blazes along the cane rows to rid the field of debris. Tanker trucks holding as much as 2,000 gallons of water are on hand in case the fire gets out of control.

"There's no sugar in the leaves, only in the stalks," Cervera explained as he watched the mechanized sugar cane harvesters cut the green tops off the 10-foot-tall cane. The equipment cuts the stalks into 1-foot lengths, then a conveyor belt shoots them into a wagon.

Seven hours later, the cane began arriving at the company's Bryant Mill at Canal Point to be ground and processed into raw sugar. It's the last season the Bryant Mill, in operation since 1963, will be used. The closing was announced three years ago and the building, property and equipment are for sale, Sanchez said.

U.S. Sugar's Clewiston mill is undergoing a multimillion-dollar upgrade and expansion that will make it one of the largest and most automated mills in the world. Its cane-crushing line, capable of handling 26,000 tons of cane a day, will be the second-largest in the world, Sanchez said.

Most of the 200 jobs at the Bryant Mill will be eliminated when the shutdown occurs at the end of this season, she said.

EFFECTS OF NAFTA

Sanchez said the new mill was needed for the company to remain competitive in the face of the North American Free Trade Agreement's scheduled 2008 opening of totally free trade with Mexico, a substantial sugar producer.

"Our goal is to be a lower-cost producer than Mexico by 2008," she said. "With our new facility, we will be."