MEDIA RELEASE

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SUGAR CANE GROWERS OPMISTIC

For a place ravaged by back to back floods earlier this year, Rakiraki town, much like its people, remains resilient. Rakiraki folks we came across recently were optimistic and upbeat.

We talked to four sugar cane growers this week and they all seemed positive and unrelenting in their determination to produce more cane this season. Many sugar cane growers in the area are generational farmers, they have seen over time, the winds of change in the industry and are happy with how things have started to change for the better in the industry.

Usman Ali of Nanuku, Rakiraki started sugar cane farming in his twenties, some twenty-four years ago. Today, his four children, three boys and a girl are all involved in the sugar farm.

This year he will be harvesting two hundred and fifty tonnes of cane, at least a hundred more tonnes than last season. He is very pleased with his efforts this year.

"We have had good cane this year, the weather has been good" Ali said.

Above: **Usman Ali standing in one of his farms at Nanuku in Rakiraki**

Above: **Some growers in the Nanuku sector and FSC personnel standing next to FSC's new Case harvester**

Attributing his success this year to a combination of factors; one: being that they have enjoyed good rainfall levels this year, complemented by affirmative government assistance which collectively has boosted his planting efforts.

This year Ali has also increased mechanical harvesting and it's the convenience of harvesting mechanically that has attracted him. "When I hire the harvester, it just takes two days", Ali said.

Ali has been one of the first growers to hire out FSC's newly imported Case mechanical harvester. He also owns a farm located on hilly terrain, which he will harvest manually with labourers.

By October he aims to starting replanting for the 2019 season.

Right: **FSC's new Case harvester working on Usman Ali's farm at Nanuku, Rakiraki**

Ganesh Rao of Wailevu, Rakiraki has also been a sugar cane grower for over twenty-five years. All his three children now reside overseas, but he still toils the land and will continue to do so for a long while yet.

Rao plants the 'mana' cane variety largely because it is a resilient crop.

"But I am starting to plant more 'nadiri' and 'qamea' now because according to him these latter two tend to give out more sugar content", says Rao.

In 2017, he had one hundred and eighty tonnes of cane, this year this has increased to two hundred and fifty tonnes.

Above: **Ganesh Rao standing next to his truck;** ***Below:*** **Rao with some growers from the Nanuku and Wailevu sectors, who had come to check out the new FSC Case harvester**

He started his harvesting last month and will most likely finish it off by early November. He uses bothboth employs manual both labourers and mechanical harvesting.

"Mechanical harvesting is less expensive in the long term considering welfare costs for the labourers", says Rao. According to him mechanical harvesting saves a lot of time for him, which frees him up for other things.

In March this year, he started inter-cropping, by planting water melons and legumes, in his sugar cane fields. By May, he harvested all his inter-crops.

Inter-cropping is something he is looking to expand into, to complement his sugar cane farm. As he goes “farmers must look at farming as a business thesedays”.

Rao is also appreciative of the Fiji Government support to the industry and his only advice to other farmers is to plant more cane, plant more varieties of cane.

At sixty-one years old **Ranjit Singh** shows no sign of slowing down. He has been toiling his twenty-six acre farm in Malau, Rakiraki since 1989. Eighteen acres are under cane.

Right: **Ranjit Singh’s 400 tonne hilly sugar cane farm in Malau, almost now fully harvested**

The interesting thing about Singh’s farm is that it’s all on the hills. He employs around seventy labourers from the Rakiraki Methodist Church circuit. “Every year labourers come from Nalawa mainly, but not always the same people”, he says.

He started planting this season’s crop in November last year. He farms his land with the assistance of his three pairs of bullocks and some horses.

During planting and harvesting times, he is usually out in his farm from 6am till 9am and then in the afternoons also from 3pm to 6pm.

Some noticeable improvements he has observed this year has been harvesting at the right time, receiving adequate rainfall and practicing good trash conservation. And there is zero tillage after planting. Harvesting this year took considerably a lesser timeframe compared to last year. He was one of the first growers who carted his cane all the way to the Lautoka Mill.

“Yes the initial mill stoppages affected me coming all the way from Rakiraki. But I have a good relationship with FSC and my harvest is almost complete now”, echoed Singh

Above: **Singh relaxing at home, seen here sitting on his ‘manja’, his 85 year old bed, built by his grandfather in 1933.**

Singh is also proud of the fact that his farm is 100% green cane, which essentially means no burnt cane.

In 2017 Singh harvested one hundred and seventy tonnes of cane, this year he is looking at an exponential growth of 135% to four hundred tonnes this year. The good weather has contributed to this growth aided by good use of fertiliser.

Looking ahead, Singh is looking to acquire another ten acres of land within Malau to further his sugar cane farming.

Singh is also involved with Malau Cane Farmers' Cooperative and is generous with his advise on sugar cane farming to the members of his community, something he will continue to do for as long as he can.

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For more information, please contact

Elenoa Korovulavula
Head of Strategic Communications
Fiji Sugar Corporation
Email: elenoa.korovulavula@fsc.com.fj
Mobile: 999 6009