

MEDIA RELEASE

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NALOTO LOCAL CROSSING GETS COMPLETED, THANKS TO GROWER INITIATIVE

Farming sugar cane on some of Fiji's western dry, rugged and hilly terrain has its own challenges; from planting along the elevated gradients, whilst all the while trying to maintain symmetrical rows of planted cane. Then the challenging task of harvesting along these hilly-slopes, it takes a bit more heart, even for a seasoned sugar cane farmer. But for Vinay Kumar of Naloto sector, in the interior of Ba, such hilly-terrain sugar cane planting, is something he has done all his life.

From a young age, Vinay Kumar, along with his brothers started assisting their father in their family sugar cane farm. Twenty years of successful sugar cane farming under his belt, Kumar, like his dad before him, is a generational farmer.

Kumar's 21 acre sugar cane farm, sprawls across the hilly Naloto terrain. He mostly plants the strong 'mana' cane variety. "This year I harvested 220 tonnes, last year it was 190", he says. To supplement his income from sugar cane, Kumar's farm also rears twenty sheep, thirty goats and seven cattle. His two brothers also own sugar cane farms, adjacent to his.

The management of the farms remain largely a family affair. His wife of thirteen years, Sanjesh Lata, along with his three children, Nitin aged 12 years, Nitisha aged 11 years and Ashmita aged 8 years, all help out in the farm during the planting season. The children attend the neighboring Balevuto District School, like their dad when he was their age. The children are all fluent in the local Naloto dialect and can read and write in iTaukei, something Kumar attests with pride.

Left: Kumar with his brother and kids standing on their newly constructed crossing



Earlier this year, disaster struck when the two successive cyclones Josie and Keni brought about flooding which washed away the crossing, connecting his farm to the main road. “Water from the mountains caused a bit of flooding in this area and washed away the original crossing”, Kumar said.

Apart from his farm, there are seven other sugar cane growers in the area, with a collective tonnage of around 800. The washing away of the crossing earlier this year put all their harvesting efforts in jeopardy because they would not be able to transport their cane to the mills for crushing. “I heard about the cane access roads work that FSC was conducting and so I inquired if our area could be considered”, he said.

FSC Chief Operating Officer Navin Chandra says “every year prior to crushing, FSC conducts a survey of cane access roads, drains and crossings, in particular if there have been natural disasters during the year. And leading up to the crushing season, we carry out repair work or maintenance work as and where the need exists”.



Above: Kumar’s already harvested cane fields on the hill

What’s different about Kumar though, is that ninety percent of the repair work, he did on his own initiative. “I had to repair it otherwise, I will not be able to harvest; not just me but the growers in this area also”, he said.

Kumar took ownership of the entire situation, rounded up his family and neighboring growers and got to action. Upon approaching FSC for assistance, the company provided him with four culverts that were 4 feet in diameter each and ready mix cement. And he set to work. His 9 ton truck was used to cart nine loads of stones, sourced from the Ba river. He invested in nine bags of cement and reinforcement bars, binding wire and steel. He drew on his neighboring growers for the much needed man-power and the crossing was completed in a month. He goes “we had at least two or three men working on the crossing each day during the month”.

Kumar has already harvested his cane and now the neighboring farms are in the process of harvesting theirs’.

The new crossing has been a real been a labour of love for Kumar, his family and all the growers in the area. They shared the responsibility and resources in order to get it done. His cheery demeanor and pleasant personality does contribute a lot to his ‘can do’ attitude. For next year, he wants to increase his tonnage. “Main thing for me has been the completion of the crossing, so now I can focus on my cane production”.

FSC is grateful and encouraged with the efforts of Kumar and the growers in the Naloto area, for taking ownership of their crossing repairs and getting it done. Chandra ends “it is a commendable feat that they have achieved”.

Right: Kumar with his elder daughter, Nitisha Kumar



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