**Ratoon Stunting Disease Found in BPS Sampling**

Each year, field staff from Burdekin Productivity Services conduct xylem (juice) sampling of older ratoon crops to check for evidence of Ratoon Stunting Disease (RSD). The samples are sent to the RSD laboratory at Sugar Research Australia (SRA) in Brisbane.

After taking approximately 1000 individual samples from ratoon crops in the Inkerman and Kalamia mill areas, BPS have been advised of 20 positive results for RSD. Manager, Rob Milla wishes to advise all growers and contractors that the small number of positive results indicate the disease is in no way widespread, but protocols must be adopted to control it and to prevent it from being spread further. Field staff will survey Invicta and Pioneer mill areas in 2016 so that each mill area is thoroughly tested every 2nd year.

The bacterium that causes RSD is found in the xylem (Juice) of the plant and this bacterium affects the vessels that carry nutrients from the roots to the rest of the plant. Older ratoon crops are particularly susceptible. In extreme cases, RSD can cause crop yield decline of more than 50%. Infection can be spread by any type of machinery that comes in contact with the juice of the plant, but in particular, harvesters, planters and stool splitters.

Although a serious disease, ratoon stunting disease can be quite easily preventable. The keys to controlling the disease are sterilisation of equipment before moving from paddock to paddock and between farms, removing older ratoon crops (4th ratoon onwards), planting approved disease-free cane and using resistant varieties where possible.

Sterilisation of equipment is achieved by firstly removing all soil and plant material with water and detergent under high pressure. Then knives and other parts of the machine that have come in contact with cane juice should be treated with a registered sterilizing agent available at your chemical reseller. The sterilising solution should be left in contact with the implement for at least 5 minutes before use.

When sterilising harvesters, the base-cutter, butt-lifter roller, chopper-box and extractor fans should be disinfected before cutting cane to be sent to the mill. If cutting billets for planting, the whole feed-chain should be disinfected, as well as the base-cutter, chopper-box and extractor fans.

BPS staff are available to all growers and contractors to further explain RSD, machinery sterilisation techniques or to conduct inspections. However, ultimately growers and contactors must understand there is a problem and cooperate in reducing the risk of spreading this disease.