

The SSI trial in Bahia Honda, Cuba, suffers an “accident”!

I was sitting at my computer at home on Monday, November 12th, 2012, when the phone suddenly rang. It was Níco, the president of the sugarcane coop in Bahia Honda, saying, “I have some bad news.” “Níco, what happened?” “Some deranged person in the town set fire to the SSI cane in three different places and we couldn’t save it. Tomorrow, I’m sending a brigade in to cut it.”

I could sense the anger, even the shame, in his voice. Níco is like that. For fourteen months, he has taken such an interest in the SSI (sustainable sugarcane initiative, developed in India) as a way to fill in the holes within a newly-planted field where about 10% of the cane plants started never germinate. I had even sensed during the fourteen months since the coop first planted SSI on a 0.9 ha trial plot (during which time I had made seven visits) that Níco was almost afraid that the other coop members would forget about his main interest in SSI for “field-filling”, and wanted to use the technique mainly for planting new cane fields.



The following morning, I left at 7, hoping to be there by when they started the cutting in order to take pictures and get some measurements of something, anything. However, going up and over the mountains was arduous as it was raining and the tires just couldn’t grip the wet concrete pavement to keep us moving very fast.

When we finally reached Bahia Honda, I saw that they had already cut half the field. A woman came running out of her house to say how all the neighbors had tried to suffocate the flames, that her son had suffered burns, that it was so sad because never had they seen sugarcane like that! The workers that knew me started to gather around, and they expressed their dismay with statements: “New cane like that, never.” “If the coop had ten fields like that, it would be rich.”, and “For the age of this cane, it’s fantastic.”



It continued to drizzle but we had work to do. I told them to lay ten randomly-selected canes on the ground, name them “one” to “ten”, count the nodes, measure the length of several, and weigh each one (Table 1.). Then I spied Raul Frontera, one of the coop’s technicians, counting and measuring the width of the upper leaves of several cane stalks while saying, “Normal is to have seven leaves but these have eleven



and they're 8 cm wide". That's when I found out that those remaining upper leaves, during the two months left before cutting the field in January, would have meant even taller stalks and more sucrose!

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Ave
Nodes/cane	25	26	26	22	23	24	24	24	23	14	
Weight/cane, kg	3.5	4.5	5.0	4.2	4.0	3.2	4.8	4.5	4.5	4.2	4.2

Two canes measured 3.7 and 3.4 m and their circumference at bottom/top were 13/11 cm and 15/10 cm, respectfully; * SSI Training Manual by Dr. B. Gujja, Dr. N. Loganandhan, Dr. V. Vinod Goud, Ms. Manisha Agarwal and Mr. Sraban Dalai

Exactly one week later, I called Luis Conde, the engineer responsible for the 0.9 ha SSI plot as well as the other 1062 hectares of cane in this coop to ask whether they had been able to count the number of tillers (stems) in three, 5-m² patches as indicated by Dr. Biksham Gujja via email. Conde explained why he wasn't satisfied with the calculations.

"I didn't like the result because the plots had too many vacant spots. Normally our sugarcane has between 12 and 13 tillers but that (in the burned field) had between 18 and 20, incredible. Look Rena, we've already gathered 14 oxcarts of burnt cane, each full cart weighs between four and five tons and we're only half done. For me, that plot of cane (0.9 ha) weighs between 150 and 160 tons!"



I replied: "Conde, if that's the case, why don't you use SSI for planting the new cane this year? Maybe the deranged individual who set fire to SSI did us a favor because at least we now recognize what we lost in that 'accident'."

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Havana, Cuba