

NEWSLETTER



PLANTERS GROUP

FEEDBACK MEETINGS

98TH

SASTA CONGRESS

60TH

ANNUAL GENERAL
MEETING

VIF IRRIGATION SCHEDULING

MEETINGS

EL NIÑO

PREPAREDNESS

RSP SYSTEM:

GROWERS ENGAGE CANE TESTING
EXPERTS ON SUCROSE PAYMENTS

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Eswatini Cane
Growers Association
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This newsletter is published to inform, educate and engage stakeholders on developments affecting sugarcane growers.

01. CEO'S NOTE

By: Sipho Nkambule,
ECGA CEO

BUILDING A RESILIENT, PROFITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE SUGARCANE INDUSTRY

Dear Growers and Stakeholders,

As we present this edition of the ECGA Quarterly Newsletter, I am reminded that the strength of Eswatini's sugar industry lies in the resilience of our growers, the partnerships we build and our collective commitment to overcoming challenges. The past quarter has been marked by important industry engagements, significant decisions and renewed efforts to strengthen grower representation, improve productivity and promote sustainable sugarcane farming.

Strengthening Grower Representation

A major highlight was ECGA's 60th Annual General Meeting, held on 26 August 2026 at Mhlume Country Club. The meeting reaffirmed our commitment to democratic governance, transparency and accountability. The clean audit outcome and approval of the grower levy adjustment, effective April 2027, reflect the confidence members continue to place in their Association. Our Planters Group Feedback Meetings also provided valuable opportunities for growers to raise concerns about rising electricity costs, labour shortages, tax compliance and industry returns. These engagements remain central to ensuring that growers' voices influence decisions affecting their businesses.

Preparing for Climate Challenges

With the possibility of El Niño bringing hotter and drier conditions, water security has become an increasingly urgent priority. We encourage growers to prepare early, manage water responsibly and adopt efficient irrigation practices. The Vuvulane Irrigation Farmers (VIF) Effective Irrigation Scheduling Project demonstrates the importance of innovation in addressing these challenges. Through modern technical tools such as Canesched, growers can improve irrigation decisions, conserve water and strengthen farm productivity.

Advancing Fairness and Innovation

The introduction of the Relative Sucrose Payment (RSP) system has generated important discussions around fairness and transparency in grower earnings. We recognise the concerns raised by farmers and remain committed to facilitating engagement with industry stakeholders to improve understanding of the system. Our participation in the 98th SASTA Congress in Durban further exposed us to emerging agricultural technologies and research that could improve production efficiency and industry competitiveness. Equally important is exploring opportunities to reduce production costs. Collective fertiliser purchasing, highlighted in our Finance Corner, presents a practical opportunity for growers, particularly smallholders, to strengthen their bargaining power and improve profitability.



Dr. Sipho Nkambule

*Chief Executive Officer | Eswatini Cane Growers
Association (ECGA)*

Moving Forward Together

As we look ahead, our vision remains clear: a profitable, diversified and sustainable cane grower. Achieving this requires active grower participation, responsible resource management, innovation and strong industry partnerships. We encourage every grower to remain engaged, embrace learning opportunities and contribute to shaping the future of our industry. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient sugarcane sector that sustains livelihoods and creates opportunities for generations to come.



Credit : @South African Sugar Technologist Association (SASTA)2026

02. SASTA Congress

ECGA's Role and Engagement

By: Mxolisi Hlophe

The Eswatini Cane Growers Association (ECGA) took part in the 98th South African Sugar Technologists' Association (SASTA) Congress held in Durban from 18 to 21 August 2026. The Association was represented by its Chief Executive Officer and Grower Support Manager, as part of a broader Eswatini delegation that included stakeholders from Eswatini Sugar, the Mills and independent cane growers.

The Congress opened with a keynote address by Dr Freddy Garces, Chief Executive Officer of Colombia's Sugarcane Research Institute (Cenicaña), on the theme "Integration and Innovation for Sustainability." He stressed the importance of collaboration and technological innovation to secure the long-term future of the sugarcane industry.

Delegates also reviewed the 2025/26 milling season across Southern Africa, examining factory performance and operational results from sugar-producing countries in the region.

Technical sessions covered precision agriculture, breeding, small-scale grower sustainability, pest management, soil and water management, and supply-chain efficiency. Among the presentations of particular interest were:

- Research on "Oilcane" — the metabolic engineering of sugarcane to produce oil-rich biomass for advanced biofuels.
- SmartCane, a satellite-based system that predicts field maturity and helps optimise harvest logistics for large outgrower networks.
- A practical trial showing lucerne as a promising cash crop for small-scale sugarcane growers in Northern Zululand, offering frequent income and strong yield potential.
- The use of satellite imagery and machine learning to estimate sugarcane yields, as well as drone-based vegetation indices to support early selection in breeding programmes.

- Advances in soil testing methods and training programmes that equip small-scale grower advisors with better soil information for improved decision-making.
- Progress in local sugarcane breeding programmes in West and Central Africa using imported true seed.

Other topics included drying-off management, drone applications for farm efficiency, the impact of contractor rates on small-scale growers, pest control, water and nutrient management, haulage efficiency metrics, and the effects of macroeconomic volatility on grower returns.

The Congress provided a valuable platform for sharing knowledge and practical solutions that can strengthen grower viability and industry resilience. ECGA remains committed to bringing relevant insights from such forums back to Eswatini's cane growers to support collective action and sustainable production.



Credit : @South African Sugar Technologist Association (SASTA)2026



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Credit : @South African Sugar Technologist Association (SASTA)2026

03. GROWER AND INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENTS

By: Sikhona Sibandze

The Eswatini Cane Growers Association (ECGA) continued to strengthen communication and engagement with its members through Planters Group Feedback Meetings held from 11-13 August 2026. The meetings provided an opportunity for growers to receive industry updates, share concerns and engage with ECGA and other key industry stakeholders.



04. ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

By: Sikhona Sibandze

The Eswatini Cane Growers Association (ECGA) held its 60th Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 26 August 2026 at Mhlume Country Club, bringing together representatives of approximately 400 member quota holders from the Mhlume, Simunye and Big Bend Planters Groups.

The AGM provided an important platform for growers to review the Association's performance, receive financial and operational reports, and participate in key decisions shaping ECGA's future direction.

Among the matters considered were the 2025/26 Annual Report and audited financial statements, which recorded a clean audit outcome. Members also deliberated on the Association's financial estimates, programme of work, grower levy and initiatives aimed at strengthening governance and promoting the long-term sustainability of the sugarcane industry.

Growers actively participated in the proceedings, exercising their voting rights on resolutions presented for approval. This demonstrated the importance of member participation, accountability and collective decision-making in guiding the Association's operations.

The 60th AGM reaffirmed ECGA's commitment to good governance, transparency and effective grower representation, while strengthening its mandate to advocate for a profitable, diversified and sustainable cane-growing sector.





05. EL NIÑO

PREPAREDNESS

By: Sikhona Sibandze

Sugarcane growers have been urged to prepare early for possible El Niño conditions during the 2026/27 season, with recent industry preparedness engagements focusing strongly on water availability, irrigation planning and responsible use of available resources.

During the August Planters Group Feedback Meetings, the Joint River Basin Authorities – Project Board (JRBA-PB) presented growers with an assessment of the national water situation and the possible implications of El Niño for sugarcane production. The presentation at Simunye on 12 August 2026 highlighted the need for growers to act before water shortages become severe.

JRBA-PB advised that El Niño probabilities were expected to rise during the season, from about 52 percent in April 2026 to as high as 96 percent by February 2027. The key message was that preparedness is most effective before river flows and dam levels begin to deteriorate. For sugarcane growers, the risk is significant because El Niño conditions can bring:

- higher temperatures, which increase crop water requirements;
- reduced rainfall and lower river flows;
- reduced inflows into dams and reservoirs;
- greater evaporation losses; and
- increased pressure on irrigation water supplies.

The concern is particularly important between November and February, when sugarcane water demand is at its highest and coincides with the hottest part of the season. JRBA-PB noted that this is also the period when El Niño impacts could become more pronounced.

WHAT GROWERS WERE ADVISED TO DO

Growers were encouraged to prepare early and manage water more carefully at farm level.

Key recommendations included:

- aligning water abstraction with approved monthly sugarcane allocation schedules;

- improving irrigation scheduling and on-farm water-use efficiency;
- beginning voluntary water savings before restrictions are imposed;
- keeping accurate records of water use and abstraction;
- avoiding panic storage and unnecessary over-abstraction; and
- sharing ground-level information on water availability and production conditions with relevant authorities.

Water storage was highlighted as an important area requiring discipline. Growers were cautioned against excessive or unauthorised storage, particularly where this could reduce water available to downstream users. In the Ngwavuma Basin, for example, JRBA-PB specifically warned against panic storage, overbank storage and over-abstraction from river flows.

The presentation also showed that different sugar-producing areas face different levels of risk. In parts of the Usuthu Basin, projected flows could fall below demand thresholds, while the Komati system was described as effectively fully allocated with limited buffer for shortages. Mbuluzi and Ngwavuma were also identified as areas where summer water deficits could become more serious.

Should water conditions worsen, growers were informed that curtailment measures could be introduced. These would be guided by factors such as river flows, dam storage levels, demand pressure, environmental requirements and transboundary obligations. Any restrictions would be applied against users' permitted allocations.

The broader message from the preparedness engagements was clear: growers should not wait for a crisis before responding. Early planning, responsible water use and close coordination with industry and water-management institutions will be critical in reducing the possible impact of El Niño on cane production.

JRBA-PB summarised this approach by stressing that the anticipated El Niño should be treated as a preparedness trigger rather than a panic trigger.



06. VIF IRRIGATION SCHEDULING MEETINGS

By: Sikhona Sibandze

STRENGTHENING IRRIGATION EFFICIENCY AMONG VUVULANE GROWERS

The Vuvulane Irrigation Farmers (VIF) Effective Irrigation Scheduling Project stakeholders' meeting was held on 8 October 2026 at Vuvulane Inkhundla, bringing together sugarcane growers, representatives from Eswatini Sugar, the Eswatini Cane Growers Association (ECGA) and irrigation extension personnel.

The meeting provided a platform for stakeholders to review progress on the irrigation scheduling project and discuss ways to improve water-use efficiency, strengthen irrigation management and promote sustainable sugarcane production, particularly in preparation for possible El Niño conditions.

Key areas of discussion included irrigation scheduling practices, water management challenges, infrastructure improvements, farmer capacity-building and the introduction of Canesched, a software tool designed to support effective irrigation planning.

The meeting also highlighted the importance of continued farmer training, technical support and collaboration among stakeholders to ensure successful implementation of the project.

The initiative forms part of ongoing efforts to help Vuvulane sugarcane growers optimise water use, improve farm productivity and strengthen resilience to changing climatic conditions.





07. RSP SYSTEM: GROWERS ENGAGE CANE TESTING EXPERTS ON SUCROSE PAYMENTS

By: Sikhona Sibandze

Cane Testing Services, in collaboration with the Eswatini Cane Growers Association (ECGA), conducted a growers' seminar on 8 October 2026 at Mhlume to enhance understanding of the Relative Sucrose Payment (RSP) system, introduced on 1 April 2026.

The seminar brought together sugarcane growers, Cane Testing Services officials and ECGA representatives to discuss the implementation of the RSP system, its impact on growers' earnings and concerns raised by farmers regarding payment adjustments.

Key areas of discussion included how the RSP system works, the calculation of sucrose payments, seasonal variations in cane quality and the system's objective of promoting fairness in grower compensation. Participants also received updates on industry findings and had an opportunity to seek clarification on matters affecting their payments.

The engagement highlighted the importance of continued grower education, transparency and collaboration between farmers and industry stakeholders. ECGA reaffirmed its commitment to supporting growers through regular engagements, addressing their concerns and advocating for a fair and sustainable sugar industry.

08. AGRIC FINANCE CORNER

By: Mxolisi Hlophe



Mxolisi Hlophe
ECGA Grower Support Manager

Part 2: Business case for a grower owned cooperative

In the last issues, we explored the case why growers should build a savings-and-credit co-operative. The short answer was ownership. Members pool savings, lend to one another, and keep the surplus in the group. Today's issue explores the case for growers to buy fertiliser in bulk, at a better price, and to return the gain to the members who used it.

There are over 300 small-scale growers (50 hectares and below) across Mhlume, Simunye and Big Bend and they spend tens of millions each year on fertiliser. Volume is the only bargaining chip a small farm has, and it appears only when the farms stand together.

Why fertiliser, and why together

Fertiliser is a standing cost on every hectare cultivated; it accounts for almost 14 per cent of production cost, following electricity and diesel. A majority of cane growers are small-scale growers farming between 3 and 50 hectares. A 5-hectare farm's fertiliser order can never fill up a truckload; when buying alone, the bag costs more, the delivery is expensive, and the grower has little room to negotiate a discount or to even reject a short or off-spec load.

What the savings look like

Working	5 ha alone	5 ha in co-op	50 ha alone	50 ha in co-op
Hectares	5	5	50	50
Cost per hectare	E7,720.01	E7,720.01	E8,126.33	E7,720.01
Discount	0%	5%	0%	5%
Fertiliser bill	E40,632	E38,600	E406,317	E386,001
Saving on the bill	–	E2,032	–	E20,316
Saving per hectare	–	E406	–	E406

The table above illustrates a simple scenario of how small-scale growers can realise savings on fertiliser costs by buying collectively through the Cooperative. With fertiliser at an estimated E8,126 per hectare and a modest 5% discount for bulk buying (E406 per hectare), a 10% discount would be about E813 per hectare. On 5 hectares, that saving is E2,032; on 50 hectares it is E20,316. The co-operative does not favour the larger farm. It changes the rate by volume, and the volume only exists when the farms order together.

Transport cost is not included in the working. A 5-hectare farm that collects alone pays that cost on a small load. A consolidated and larger delivery to Mhlume, Simunye or Big Bend spreads it across every bag on the truck. If the co-operative's delivery is cheaper than the grower's own trip, the net saving is more than E406 per hectare.

Buying together does three things a single farm cannot do. It turns many small orders into one volume a supplier has to price properly. It spreads the cost of a delivery from Manzini across every bag on the truck, instead of leaving a 5-hectare farm to collect a small load on its own. And it returns the gain to the member who ordered, as a lower invoice or a year-end refund, rather than leaving it with a shop. This is not an untested idea. Growers in the Big Bend mill area are already buying fertiliser in bulk through the mill, and those in the scheme are already seeing real savings on the cost of the bag. The co-operative is the means for growers in all three mill areas to do the same, in their own name, and to keep the benefit.

09. UPCOMING EVENTS

03 NOV 2026

Mhlume Planters Group
Feedback Meeting

Hambanathi Hall

04 NOV 2026

Simunye Planter Group
Feedback Meeting

Caritas Manzini

05 NOV 2026

Big Bend Planters Group
Feedback Meeting

Phumulamcashi community Hall

09 DEC 2026

ECGA ExCo Quarterly
Meeting

ESA Boardroom, Mbabane



**Eswatini Cane
Growers Association**

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