Sweet success
Breakthrough harvester turns tide at Steen's

By CALVIN LEAR
Acadiana Editor

ABBEVILLE — It's amazing what these new mechanical contraptions can do. Just ask Charley Steen, whose family's sugarcane syrup business was suffering a sales slump for most of the '80s until someone showed him a new gadget.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen the machine, or at least something like it.

"I saw one in Texas about 10 years ago and it didn't work worth a damn," he said.

Then about two years ago some fellow walked into Steen's Syrup Co., and after a pleasant exchange of "Good day," asked Steen why his mill wasn't using a sugarcane "chopper harvester." Explaning his trip to Texas, Charley told the salesman that he didn't think the machines were worth a damn.

"Oh yeah, but we've worked out all the problems and now they're OK," came the reply — in a Crocodile Dundee accent.

Charley Steen wasn't convinced, although the idea sounded good.

Chopper harvesters top off, cut out and chop the stalks, and — here's the big difference — remove the rubbish and drop the cane in waiting. Environmental advantage since the contraptions don't do that. They operate their machine that sold burn the crops in the field.

With tight regulations on incineration looming — Florida and Texas have adopted tough laws on burning — Steen said he sees the writing on the wall for the Bayou State.

"Louisiana is lagging behind, but the days of burning sugarcane are numbered," he said, adding that Steen's never burned cane anyway because it would leave the syrup tasting burnt.

With the perfected chopper harvesters now in use, and with an eye on France as a potential cane syrup market, the Steen's family, makers of cane syrup since 1910, is turning around 10 straight years of declining sales.

"It looks like we can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel," Charley Steen said.

The real coup d'etat, however, comes in November when Charley Steen and the mates from Down Under sign a contract making Steen's the exclusive Austrolt dealer for Louisiana.

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