

# Michigan Sugar tackling low sugar content

Mary Drier, For the Tribune

Published 7:00 am, Thursday, February 2, 2017

<http://www.michigansthumb.com/news/article/Michigan-Sugar-tackling-low-sugar-content-10901524.php>

THUMB AREA — With the planting of the next sugar beet crop expected to start in about three months, the [Michigan Sugar Co. Agronomy Research Division](#) is working on sugar content issues.

While tonnage per acre was good, the sugar content for the 2016 crop was down.

“The big challenge this year has been sugar content in the sugar beets. Sugar content stood at 15.9 percent this year, versus a five-year average of 18.3 percent,” said [Ray VanDriessche](#), Michigan Sugar director of community and government relations. “We believe it is due to a combination of factors, and Michigan Sugar agronomists are working hard to learn more.”

During the 2016 growing season, there was a long dry spell in the summer. Moisture is needed for sugar content and tonnage to develop. Lower sugar content means less sugar processed.

“Last year, Michigan Sugar partnered with local growers on more than 90 sugar beet research projects and that work will continue in 2017.”

The 2016-2017 campaign of processing beets to sugar is at about the halfway point.

“The slice campaign is moving along well. We are estimating the campaign to finish on schedule around the first week of April,” he said.

“The slice campaign is integral to the sugar production process, and it’s important for the region’s economy since we hire several hundred additional workers during campaign every year.”

Upgrades were done to some factories last summer. In January 2016, Michigan Sugar officials announced plans to make \$125 million in upgrades at its four factories over the next five years.

“Michigan Sugar is constantly incorporating the latest technology available in the industry,” VanDriessche explained. “In the past year, we have made several upgrades and improvements at both the Sebewaing and Croswell facilities, totaling more than \$9 million in total investment.”

Last June, a \$3.3 million cossette mixer was installed at the Sebewaing plant. The new mixer’s intense heat scalds the cossettes to initiate the sugar extraction which is expected to save about 8 million gallons of water over the course of this campaign as well as reduce the total energy use by 3 to 5 percent.

Also, the plan is to do about \$55 million worth of upgrades at the Croswell factory with some of the rest of the funds going to the other factories in Bay City and Caro. The 115-year old Croswell factory has not received as many upgrades as the other factories. Some of the upgrades at the Croswell factory were done to the flumes, slicing, and thick-juice storage.

Something new that is being tried at that plant is “air conditioning” the sugar beet piles.

“The mobile air conditioning units we tested in Croswell are a good example of the trials Michigan Sugar undertakes at our facilities to constantly improve our processes,” VanDriessche said. “We conducted some initial tests of the mobile AC systems last fall; and based on our findings, we are going to continue testing the systems again next season.”

The air-cooling units are being tested to determine if there is an economic benefit to bringing the beet pile temperatures down faster with the help of machines. The information and cost will be analyzed.

Michigan Sugar is a grower-owned cooperative with about 1,100 farmers, mostly in Michigan.