

**I HAVE BEEN RIDING WITH FARM MANAGER** Ruben Rifa in his pickup for nearly an hour in South Florida near Clewiston, touring 10s of thousands of acres of flat sugar cane fields. The cane crop itself, often more than 10 feet high, consistently blocks the view in any direction.

Should Rifa decide to abandon me in this subtropical sun amid dense cane fields crisscrossed with dark-water canals that provide habitat to resident alligators, water moccasins and the occasional Florida panther, my demise would not be sweet. Oh, the irony.

This is the world of U.S. Sugar, the largest producer of sugar in the U.S. Based in Clewiston, on the southwest shore of Lake Okeechobee, U.S. Sugar grows cane on as much as 200,000 acres in a given year and processes every bit of it into granulated sugar, molasses and liquid sweetener right in Clewiston.

The effort to do so is meticulously planned because it has to be. Unlike corn, soybeans or wheat, which can be safely stored for months, sugar cane should be processed within 7.5 hours from the time it is cut. The process of cutting the cane gives bacteria from the soil ready access to feed on the cane's sucrose—creating glucose polymers known as dextran.

“Dextran affects the amount of recoverable sugars, which in turn makes it more difficult to process cane,” says Rifa, who manages the 38,000-acre Area 2 of U.S. Sugar's six management zones. “This can result in significant losses of production.”

Or as U.S. Sugar's Harvest Operations Manager Juan Cervera says, “If you leave a train car full of cane sitting too long, you begin to smell the change.”

As a result, U.S. Sugar's cane harvest is timed to cut just enough cane to supply a steady stream of product to be processed without delay. Harvest, which generally begins in October, will continue well into April and runs 24 hours per day, weather permitting.

The harvest for U.S. Sugar is greatly helped by the existence of its multiple spur rail lines that allow wagonloads of cane to be dumped into train cars at numerous elevators (43 sites) spread out over a 200-square-mile production region. Every bit of their harvested cane is then delivered to the processing/refining plant via rail.

The company's Clewiston facility then ships finished sugar products, from five-pound bags of various brands of >>



# HARD WORK, SWEET RESULT

STORY BY DES KELLER /// PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DEHOOG