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09Mar98 CUBA: CUBA SETS NEW WAGE SCHEME TO IMPROVE SUGAR QUALITY.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, March 9 (Reuters) - After years of declining sugar yields, Cuba will offer an incentive plan in the next harvest to motivate field hands and private farmers to improve the quality of their work and producers to increase the planting of cane varieties with higher sucrose contents.

Monday's Trabajadores, Cuba's official trade union weekly, noted that pay so far has been tied to quantity, and with the determining factor being weight.

But beginning next year, the quality of work will be factored into workers' wages and into payments made to sugar cane producers, the paper said.

The plan is aimed at rebuilding Cuba's dwindling sugar output. Cuban sugar production, regularly more than seven million tonnes a year before 1990, made the Caribbean island the biggest exporter of raw sugar in the world.

By 1990, however, production had hit a low of 3.3 million tonnes. It recovered somewhat in the 1994-95 harvest, but has fallen back again.

The Cuban sugar industry has admitted that one of the main reasons is the critical scarcity of high-quality sugar cane on the plantations. Sugar Minister General Ulises Rosales del Toro said in today's Trabajadores, "I am convinced that in three or four years...we will have the amounts of cane that we need (to produce more sugar)".

"We will again have harvests of seven or eight million tonnes with a new advantage, that of quality - making more sugar at a lower cost," he said.

Taken into account in the new pay scheme will be factors affecting quality: good seedstock, careful weeding, cane stalks cut close to the ground, stalks short of tops and leaves, and a minimal amount of extraneous materials in the load.

The producers are the state-owned, cooperative, and mom-and-pop private firms that grow sugar cane. Cuba nationalized the giant privately-owned sugar plantations in 1960.

General Rosales del Toro was quoted as saying that the priorities of the sugar sector are "to produce more cane, improve the industry's efficiency, and transform our ways of working to achieve efficient administration."

In a similar vein, President Fidel Castro announced last December that during the current harvest, the industry would lower its immediate expectations by not seeking to cut every available stick of cane.

The strategy, Castro said, was to ensure long-term recovery, by building up a reserve of good cane, replanting fallow areas and replacing older, low-yielding fields.

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