How the debate over a soft drink tax is taking a toll on cane growers

Dan Galligan, CANEGROWERS CEO
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Like every farmer in Australia, cane growers are proud of the quality food they produce. It is natural, it is full of energy and it’s found at the happiest of events. Yet the debate around a sugar tax, or more accurately on the sugar content of soft drinks, and the television air time being granted to self-promoting health book authors are taking their toll. Hard-working farming families are being made to feel like they are responsible for the health problems of our modern nation. That’s pretty depressing and it is grossly unfair.

Obesity rates have been going up in Australia while overall sugar consumption has been static for many years (even as the population has grown). And a recent Nielsen study pointed to a 3.5 per cent decline in sugar sales to consumers over the past year alone.

CANEGROWERS wholeheartedly supports measures which encourage Australians to take control of their health by eating a balanced diet and exercising. We don’t think a tax is a very helpful contribution to a sensible discussion around the overall health of Australians – the problem of obesity is much more complex than soft drink. While a tax would be a tidy revenue-raising measure for government, the evidence from overseas indicates it would do little to reduce sugar consumption and reverse obesity rates. In Mexico, where the tax went beyond soft drink, sugar consumption fell initially but has gone back up.

And of course, sugar is just one component of our modern diet and the quality of our entire diet needs to be considered if we are improve our health. CANEGROWERS is trying to inject into the public debate around a sugar tax our voice of reason, explaining what the industry does and how big and important it is for Queensland and Australia, putting around $2 billion a year into the economy.

We reject being forced to be the scapegoats in the dietary debate and have our reputation and our product tarnished in this way. Cane growers deserve to be proud of their natural, Australian sugar. Obesity, and the health problems that stem from it, is not just an issue for sugar and it’s not just an issue for taxation. It is an issue of responsibility for the whole community.