

July 24, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
& Forestry
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable GT Thompson
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
468 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Boozman, and Ranking Member Scott,

As leading national, state, and local organizations dedicated to environmental protection, community investment and social justice, we are writing to express our concern about the sugar program's support for pre-harvest sugarcane burning. Cane burning is an outdated agricultural practice that poisons marginalized communities and damages the environment. The sugar program creates an economic burden on every American household and is complicit in human rights abuses in the Dominican Republic.

In Florida alone, the sugar industry burns nearly half a million acres of sugarcane for eight months of the year, poisoning the air in blue-collar, predominantly Black communities. [Studies show](#) that particulate matter from cane burning can cause cancer, asthma, and other respiratory problems. Communities near sugarcane fields suffer some of the worst smoke pollution in the country, with hospital admission rates spiking for respiratory health issues during a 9-month harvest season.

When the wind blows toward higher-income, predominantly white communities, sugarcane burning is subject to stricter state regulations. If that double standard wasn't enough, Florida recently passed a new law to protect sugar companies from lawsuits filed by residents who are harmed by "particle emissions" — legislative language backed by Big Sugar.

Late last year, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection blocked sugar imports into the U.S. from a Fanjul family-owned sugar plantation after the Department of Labor found evidence of forced labor at the Central Romana plantation. The move put a spotlight on Big Sugar's abusive practices beyond American borders, signaling accountability is on the way. However, at present, U.S. taxpayer dollars are still used to support the industry conditions that make these abuses possible.

Cane burning has lasting effects on our environment. Studies show that burning cane produces black carbon, "which has powerful global warming effects." In a peer-reviewed [study](#), Florida State University researchers found sugarcane burning produces roughly 5,000 tons of particulate matter per year. That's as much as the total annual emissions of every motor vehicle in the state of Florida. The FSU team found mortality rates from this exposure almost 10 times higher for residents living next to the fields than for those outside the immediate area. That amounts to one to six deaths per year from sugarcane burning emissions.

The sugar industry also has devastating impacts on Florida's water supply. In Florida, the sugar industry is exploiting Florida's most important water source, Lake Okeechobee, and the treasured wetlands of the Everglades. This has led to repeated damaging discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, triggering toxic-algae blooms and other devastating impacts on marine life and all who depend on clean water. Today, estimates suggest half the fish and wildlife in the Everglades have in their systems methylmercury, a toxic byproduct of sugarcane farming. Methylmercury can poison animals and "reduce I.Q., deficits in language, attention, motor function, [and] memory" in people.

Furthermore, American taxpayers are footing the bill for the sugar industry's bad practices through a subsidy of \$2.4 to \$4 billion per year, all to send profits mostly to a few wealthy sugar producers. On top of that, Big Sugar contributed to the loss of 123,000 American manufacturing jobs between 1997 and 2015. And the jobs created by the industry are often low-wage, with poor working conditions and little opportunity for career growth.

Ironically, the federal government's price protections have caused Big Sugar to fall behind. While global industry leaders innovate, diversify revenue streams, and create jobs in new areas, Big Sugar is stuck in the past. For example, much of the global industry has shifted to green harvesting, a process which makes use of the entire crop to create biofuels and bioproducts, all without burning. Big Sugar ignores that opportunity.

There is international precedent for this transition. In Brazil, starting in the 1990s, residents of the country's sugar-producing region voiced concerns like those in Florida today: respiratory problems, smoke, and ash. In response to public pressure, a new law required the elimination of pre-harvest burns over a three-decade period. The industry invested in harvest equipment that allowed for cutting the sugarcane without burning it. Over time, the country eliminated nearly all burning. Now, sugarcane leaves are left behind as a protective layer for soil or are collected to generate renewable energy. Excess electricity from sugar mills is sold to energy utilities, often at a sizable profit.

A transition away from sugarcane burning would deliver benefits all around: to the largely working-class communities surrounding sugarcane fields; to the industry, which would increase its competitiveness; and to our environment and natural resources.

We know you have many competing priorities in this year's Farm Bill, but we urge you to use the conservation title as a vehicle to advance the sugar industry and move past the harmful practice of sugarcane burning.

Sincerely,

Sierra Club
League of Conservation Voters
Friends of the Everglades
Black Lives Matter Muck City
Dominicans for Justice and Peace
Florida Conservation Voters
Patagonia
Friends of the Earth
Franciscan Action Network
Center for Biological Diversity
Florida Oceanographic Society
Indian Riverkeeper

Rivers Coalition

VoteWater

Florida Clinicians for Climate Action

Florida Council of Churches

The Angling Company Key West

Florida Keys Outfitters

Occupy Democrats

Citizens Against Agricultural Field Burning

Lower Keys Guides Association