

ENERGY

Sugar yield quells ethanol shortage fear

APORN RATH PHOONPHONGPHIPAT

Ethanol shortage concerns in Thailand have subsided on the good sugar yield from the latest sugar cane crop, providing abundant molasses for the ethanol industry, says a senior industrial official.

Thai Sugar Millers Corporation Ltd (TSMC), which includes all Thai 52 sugar factories, said the current 2016/17 sugar crushing crop began on Dec 6, and has since found that the sugar yield was higher than last year's.

The crushing also produces substantial quantities of molasses, a byproduct that is used to produce ethanol, which is then blended with pure gasoline and sold to motorists as gasohol, assuaging fears regarding a possible ethanol shortage in the oil industry.

"There are no concerns about an ethanol shortage at this moment," said Sirivuth Siamphakdee, the chairman of the TSMC.

In December 2016, mismanagement among ethanol factories and a delay in molasses production raised concerns about a possible ethanol shortage during the year-end period, when demand was higher.

The Energy Business Department began managing private ethanol producers to ensure they had maintenance shutdowns at appropriate times or even delayed maintenance in order to prevent ethanol shortages.

Thailand normally produces around 4



A farmer harvesting sugar cane in Suphan Buri. Thailand's sugar production this year is expected to exceed an earlier forecast of 9.1-9.2 million tonnes. JIRAPORN KUHAHAN

million tonnes of molasses a year. Around 1.2 million tonnes go to the liquor industry and around 500,000 tonnes are exported, leaving around 2.5-2.7 million tonnes for the ethanol industry.

Total ethanol production capacity in Thailand is 5.05 million litres a day. But only 4.2 million litres a day is produced due to the seasonal limitations of molasses and tapioca, the other source of ethanol.

Supply of the raw materials is expected to rise substantially in the coming years and the government is encouraging farmers to switch from growing rice to sugar cane, which can generate more added value.

Thailand's sugar production this year is expected to exceed the forecast of 9.1-9.2 million tonnes made at the beginning of crushing season in early December 2016.

The yield ratio for the sugar in this

2016/17 crop stood at 86.8, which implies that one tonne of sugar cane produces 86.8 kilogrammes of sugar.

That was higher than the 81.5 in the previous crop, said Mr Sirivuth.

Commercial cane sugar (CCS), which measures cane sugar content, was also higher in the recent crop.

CCS for the 2016/17 crop is at 10.9 compared with 10.3 in the previous crop, he said.

The TSMC has not yet revised its forecast for total sugar production, saying it needs to observe further whether there are any negative factors that can adversely affect production since the crushing process has only been in force for about a month.

"We may revise the production again by early April," said Mr Sirivuth, adding that the sugar crushing season will come to a close by the end of April.