

BY MICHAEL AGABA

MASINDI. Stakeholders in Masindi's sugar industry have rallied behind a proposal to relocate roadside weighbridges outside core sugarcane growing zones, arguing that their presence within production areas has fuelled theft and exploitation of farmers.

The position emerged on Tuesday during a consultative meeting chaired by Masindi Resident District Commissioner (RDC) Darius Nandinda, following the Ministry of Trade's February 13 directive closing roadside weighbridges across the district.

The meeting, held at Kabalega Resort in Masindi Town, was convened on the instructions of State Minister for Trade, Gen Wilson Mbadi, after concerns were raised by sugar millers, farmers' cooperatives and local leaders over the operations and subsequent closure of weighbridges.

Participants noted that since the closure, reported cases of sugarcane theft have significantly declined.

Masindi Municipal Mayor Ronald Kyomuhendo, who is also a commercial sugarcane farmer, said roadside weigh-

bridges had become ready markets for stolen cane.

"Since the closure of the roadside weighbridges, cases of sugarcane theft have significantly reduced because sugarcane thieves don't have a market where to easily sell stolen sugarcane," Mr Kyomuhendo said.

The district chairperson, Mr Cosmas Byaruhanga, attributed irregularities to middlemen and dealers operating weighbridges without clear links to licensed factories or verified farmer registers.

Justification

"The middlemen and dealers at weighbridges reduce the money which the farmer is supposed to receive. If factories knew their farmers, they wouldn't need middlemen to buy sugarcane. Why can't they buy directly from a farmer?" Mr Byaruhanga wondered.

He urged the government to enforce Section 26 of the Sugar Regulations,

which requires that all sugarcane deliveries be weighed at licensed premises. Section 26(2) provides that "the weighing of sugarcane shall be carried out at the licensed premises of a licensed person."

Mr Byaruhanga proposed that weighbridges be relocated away from the sugarcane operation zones to areas along the Kampala road towards Luwero, beyond the main growing belt, to reduce opportunities for theft while maintain-

SIGNIFICANCE

A report from the engagements will be submitted to the Trade minister and the President to guide a final decision, as authorities weigh relocation as a long-term measure to curb sugarcane theft while safeguarding farmers' livelihoods.

ing market access for non-contracted farmers. Kinyara Sugar Ltd Public Relations Officer Francis Mugerwa supported the relocation proposal, saying the company would welcome weighbridges being moved outside the sugarcane production area.

Kinyara's take

"We welcome a relocation of roadside weighbridges outside the sugarcane operation area, if possible after Kafu River on Kampala Highway, so that thefts associated with roadside weighbridges being located inside the sugarcane operation area are minimised," Mugerwa said.

He added that efforts to streamline and regulate weighbridge operations in a manner that protects farmers have already contributed to reducing theft.

"Whereas we welcome co-existence with stakeholders in the sugar industry, we recommend streamlined guidelines that protect farmers and interests of millers like us who invest heavily in out-

grower schemes and corporate social responsibility programmes that have uplifted communities and businesses in Masindi and beyond," Mr Mugerwa said.

However, the chairman of Bunyoro Sugarcane Farmers Cooperative Union, Mr Mahmoud Kazimbiraine, called for the reopening of weighbridges, proposing the formation of a regulatory committee to oversee their operations and develop clear guidelines.

Victoria Sugar Ltd Operations Officer Nasif Ismail suggested dialogue between Victoria Sugar and Kinyara Sugar management to find a lasting solution to the weighbridge impasse.

In his ruling, RDC Nandinda maintained that the status quo would remain, with the closure of roadside weighbridges continuing as the District Security Committee undertakes further consultations with company managers and directors.

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