Masindi farmers speak out on weighbridge relocation

Government officials argue that the weighbridges had become conduits for illegal trade.

BY ALEX ASHABA & ISMAIL BATEGEKA

The Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Cooperatives last month ordered the removal of roadside sugarcane weighbridges in Masindi District as part of a crackdown on illegal trade and cane theft in Bunyoro Sub-region.

The decision was backed by the Masindi District Council during a meeting on March 3. District officials recommended relocating weighbridges to areas outside the main sugarcane-growing zones, in line with Section 26 (2) of the Sugar Regulations, which governs the industry.

Authorities, working alongside security agencies, recently shut down several weighbridges, including Katuugo, Rukondwa, Kihande, and Mirya.

While government officials argue that the weighbridges had become conduits for illegal trade, farmers say the closures have left them stranded with tonnes of unsold cane drying in their gardens.

One affected weighbridge, located at Mile Two in Kihande Cell, Masindi Municipality, was established in 2022 by the Bunyoro Sugarcane Farmers' Cooperative Union Ltd (BSCUL). It helped farmers determine the exact weight of their cane before sale and addressed complaints that growers were often cheated by factories. Farmers paid fees ranging from Shs25,000 to Shs50,000 depending on the size of the truck.

For farmers such as Mr John Mwesigwa from Bikonzi Sub-county, the weighbridge was a lifeline.



Workers at a former weighbridge site in Masindi Town last Friday. PHOTO/ISMAIL BATEGEKA

"I used to take my cane to the weighbridge and get paid the same day because buyers were waiting. Now I have to hire a truck to transport the cane to a factory, which costs between Shs300,000 and Shs600,000 per trip," he said.

The closures have particularly affected smallholder farmers, many of whom struggle to share transport or risk having harvested cane dry in the gardens, reducing both its weight and value.

Mr Sampo Atuganyira, a farmer in Nyangahya Division, added that fewer buyers now operate in the area, reducing competition and leaving farmers with limited options.

"When roadside weighbridges were operating, different brokers competed to buy cane. This sometimes helped us farmers negotiate slightly better prices. Now we have to look for buyers ourselves or transport the cane to factories, which is expensive for farmers," he said.

Despite these concerns, the Trade Ministry defended the move, saying it aims to regulate the sugarcane sector and protect factory supply chains.

Masindi District chairperson Mr Cosmas Byaruhanga said the action is meant to eliminate middlemen who buy cane and resell to sugar companies, denying farmers additional benefits such as year-end cash top-ups from factories.

The district council also adopted measures to formalise the sector, including requiring vehicles transporting sugarcane to be clearly labelled with the names of the companies they supply. The use of tuk-tuks, boda bodas, and pickup trucks for cane transport has been banned, as they are often linked to illegal trade.

BACKGROUND

State Minister for Trade Gen Wilson Mbadi earlier held consultations with sugar millers and leaders of the Bunyoro Sugarcane Farmers Cooperative Union on February 17, on the location of weighbridges. He later directed the Masindi RDC to convene meetings, which were held on February 24 and 26. The meetings recommended relocating the weighbridges.