

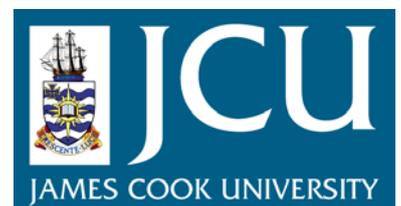
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**Ground Detection Sensor
for Cane Harvester Base-Cutter
Height Control**

Thesis submitted by

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in the School of Engineering
James Cook University**

Abstract

The harvesting of sugar cane is the first stage in the commercial milling of sugar cane to produce sugar and plays a major role in determining the overall efficiency of the sugar production process. In Australia, where virtually all sugar cane is harvested using mechanical harvesters, efficient operation of the harvester is essential to reduce operating costs. One area of harvesting that has, on numerous occasions, been identified as an impediment to improved harvester efficiency is the adjustment of the base cutter height. Improper setting during harvesting has a number of serious consequences for sugar production including reduced production, crop damage, additional harvester running costs and inefficient transportation and milling of the sugar cane due to the introduction of dirt.

The overall aim of this thesis was to develop a ground detection sensor based on microwave radar technology that could sense ground level in front of a working sugar cane harvester. The eventual purpose of such a device would be to automatically control the cutting height to the optimum level and thus improving the efficiency of the harvesting, farming and milling processes.

The measurement technique investigated is based upon the use of a radio transmitter and receiver positioned on either side of the row of sugar cane. The principle of this design is that a receiver close to ground level would experience more attenuation from the soil than a receiver positioned well above ground

level. Thus, it was suggested that changes in the received signal strength with respect to the height above ground level could be used to detect changes in the height of the ground.

The project evolved in two main stages. Initially, work concentrated on verifying the sensing principle in the laboratory and later in the field. Testing verified the proposed measurement procedure with the following major conclusions. Firstly, for best results a radio signal of 2-3GHz polarised horizontal to the ground was most suitable. This signal provided the best compromise between being insensitive to the presence of the sugar cane while still allowing practical sized antennas to be employed. Secondly, field-testing showed that the sugar cane stalks do affect the ideal sensor response with the orientation and condition (density, leaf matter, etc) of the sugar cane having a noticeable influence on the measurements. These results suggested that a practical sensor would need to incorporate automatic compensation for the variations in the sugar cane and that some averaging or signal processing would have to be applied to remove the underlying trends.

The second stage of the project involved building a prototype sensor and testing it on a working sugar cane harvester. The prototype worked by measuring the received amplitude of a 2.4GHz, horizontally polarised microwave radio signal that was transmitted from one side of the sugar cane row to the other. For this application, multiple receivers are stacked vertically to measure the full height profile instantaneously. The idea of using multiple receivers with some

positioned well above the ground level, was to compensate for the changing density of the sugar cane. The transmitter and receiver antennas were based on rectangular microstrip patch antenna arrays. The low profile of these patch antennas meant that they were ideal for flush mounting on the harvesters' crop divider walls. Dedicated transmitter and receiver electronics was also needed to generate and detect the microwave radio signals used by this system. A full control system and data logger was developed for this application.

The prototype sensor that was developed was trialled on an Austoft harvester over a one week period in the Burnett region. These tests were used to confirm that the sensor would work and that it could survive the harsh conditions experienced during harvesting.

Overall, the aim of this thesis was to test the potential of the microwave ground height detection sensor for automated control of the base cutter height on sugar cane harvester and to develop a plan to use this technology in a commercial base cutter height control system.

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Rayner Page

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2. PAGE, R.L. and WOODS, G.S. "Sensing of Ground Level through Sugar Cane using Microwave Techniques", Workshop on Applications of Radio Science (WARS'00), La Trobe University, 27th - 29th April, 2000.
3. WOODS, G.S. and PAGE, R.L. "Automated base cutter height control" JCU Sugar Technology 2000, Conference 8th November 2000.
4. WOODS, G.S., PAGE, R.L. and MASKELL, D.L. "Ground Height Detection Sensor for Control of Harvesting Equipment" 2002 Asia Pacific Microwave Conference, Kyoto, Japan, 19-22 November, 2002.

Table Of Contents

Chapter 1: Background.....	15
1.1 Introduction	15
1.2 Growing Sugar Cane	17
1.3 Problems with Inefficient Base cutter Height Control.....	19
1.3.1 Benefits to the Farming Sector	20
1.3.2 Benefits to the Harvesting Sector.....	22
1.3.3 Benefits to the Refining Sector	26
1.4 Background.....	28
1.5 Sensing Techniques.....	29
1.5.1 Mechanical Contact Sensors	34
1.5.2 Hydraulic Pressure Sensors.....	36
1.5.3 Ultrasonic Sensors.....	37
1.5.4 Microwave Sensors	38
1.5.5 Other sensors	39
1.6 Aim.....	40
Chapter 2: Laboratory Testing.....	42
2.1 Introduction	42
2.2 Simulation Results	43
2.2.1 Knife Edge Diffraction Model	43
2.2.2 Electromagnetic Field Simulation.....	47
2.3 Laboratory Measurements.....	56
2.4 Conclusion	67
Chapter 3: Field Testing.....	69
3.1 Introduction	69
3.2 Field Test System	69
3.3 Summary	87
Chapter 4: Prototype Ground Detection Sensor	89
4.1 Introduction	89
4.2 Prototype Ground Detection Sensor Design.....	89
4.3 Detector Testing Results	95
4.4 Installation on Harvester	96
4.5 Summary	100
Chapter 5: Harvester Testing.....	103
5.1 Introduction	103
5.2 Harvester Trial.....	103
5.3 Conclusions.....	109
Chapter 6: Conclusion	111
6.1 Conclusion	111
6.2 Future Work.....	113

Table of Figures

Figure 1.1: Sugar cane paddock before planting of sugar cane.....	18
Figure 1.2: Photograph of the front of a sugar cane harvester.	23
Figure 1.3: Photograph of the row dividers and base cutter of a harvester.	23
Figure 1.4: Close-up photograph of the base cutter of a harvester.	24
Figure 1.5: Trend of extraneous matter at mill over time.....	25
Figure 1.6: The typical view of from the cabin of a harvester during operation. .	30
Figure 1.7: Close-up photograph of the operator’s view to the ground below. ...	31
Figure 1.8: Photograph of trash caught behind the row divider.....	33
Figure 1.9: Brazilian floating base cutter design for sugar cane harvesters	35
Figure 2.1: Transmission configuration of the microwave ground detection sensor	43
Figure 2.2: Knife-edge diffraction model of the sugar cane row.....	45
Figure 2.3: Predicted signal loss around ground.....	46
Figure 2.4: Configuration of the Real Time FDTD model used to simulate the effect of the sugar cane row profile.	48
Figure 2.5: Results of the Real Time FDTD model that was	50
Figure 2.6: Real Time model of field amplitude in dB vs height.	51
Figure 2.7: Configuration of the Real Time FDTD model that	53
Figure 2.8: Results of the Real Time FDTD model that	54
Figure 2.9: Electromagnetic field strength measured along a	55

Figure 2.10: 3D S-Band Plot for Sample #1.....	59
Figure 2.11: 3D C-Band Plot for Sample #1.....	59
Figure 2.12: 3D X-Band Plot for Sample #1.....	60
Figure 2.13: 3D S-Band Plot for Sample #2.....	60
Figure 2.14: 3D C-Band Plot for Sample #2.....	61
Figure 2.15: 3D X-Band Plot for Sample #2.....	61
Figure 2.16: 3D S-Band Plot for Sample #3.....	62
Figure 2.17: 3D C-Band Plot for Sample #3.....	62
Figure 2.18: 3D X-Band Plot for Sample #3.....	63
Figure 2.19: 2D S-Band Plot for all Samples.....	63
Figure 2.20: 2D C-Band Plot for all Samples.....	64
Figure 2.21: 2D X-Band Plot for all Samples.....	64
Figure 3.1: Schematic of the portable field testing unit.....	70
Figure 3.2: Portable testing unit showing the worm drive mounts.....	72
Figure 3.3: Photograph of the control box showing the YIG microwave.....	73
Figure 3.4: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #1, Trebone.....	77
Figure 3.5: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #1, Trebone.....	77
Figure 3.6: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #2, Trebone.....	78
Figure 3.7: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #2, Trebone.....	78
Figure 3.8: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #4, Trebone.....	79
Figure 3.9: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #4, Trebone.....	79
Figure 3.10: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #5, Trebone.....	80

Figure 3.11: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #5, Trebone	80
Figure 3.12: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #8, Trebone	81
Figure 3.13: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #8, Trebone	81
Figure 3.14: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #9, Trebone	82
Figure 3.15: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #9, Trebone	82
Figure 3.16: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #11, Trebone	83
Figure 3.17: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #11, Trebone	83
Figure 3.18: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #12, Trebone	84
Figure 3.19: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #12, Trebone	84
Figure 3.20: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #15, Trebone	85
Figure 3.21: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #15, Trebone	85
Figure 3.22: Portable FTU 3-D Results, location #16, Trebone	86
Figure 3.23: Portable FTU 2-D Results, location #16, Trebone	86
Figure 3.24: Photograph of the back of a high clearance.....	88
Figure 4.1: Ground Detection Sensor configuration using a receiver array	90
Figure 4.2: Prototype ground detection sensor configuration schematic	90
Figure 4.3: Receiver calibration for Antenna #6	94
Figure 4.4: Measurement system response under controlled conditions	96
Figure 4.5: Photograph of the surface of the receiver antenna	98
Figure 4.6: Installation of the antenna on a sugar cane harvester.....	98
Figure 4.7: A photograph of the trash caught behind.....	100
Figure 4.8: Photograph of the “black box” of the prototype sensor.	101

Figure 4.9: Photograph of the "black box" mounted.....	102
Figure 5.1: The effects of digital filtering to smooth the sensor output	107
Figure 5.2: Measured amplitude trends on all twelve	109