Ground Detection Sensor
for Cane Harvester Base-Cutter
Height Control

Thesis submitted by
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in November 2006

for the degree of Masters of Engineering Science (Research)
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. Theses 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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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wife Rebecca for the support over the years that it has taken to write this thesis. I spent many hours locked away in the study where I was supplied with endless cups of coffee and hot chocolate, for this I am very grateful, so thank you. My appreciation also goes to the numerous people who proof read this in its entirety, you all know who you are.

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of the Sugar Research and Development Corporation and the assistance of numerous people from different organizations. The people named below are gratefully acknowledged for their assistance during and throughout the duration of this project.

Dr. Graham Woods. (James Cook University, Townsville)
Dr. Matt Schembri. (Sugar Research Institute, Mackay)
Mr. John Ellis. (James Cook University, Townsville)
Mr. John Renehan. (James Cook University, Townsville)
Mr. John Becker. (James Cook University, Townsville)
Mr. Mal Baker. (Case Pty Ltd, Bundaberg)
Mr. Ian Stanton. (Case Pty Ltd, Bundaberg)
Mr. Graham Yates. (Case Pty Ltd, Bundaberg)
Mr. John Irving. (Irving Farm Services, Ingham)
Publications arising from this work


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.


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