14 farmers agree to grow sorghum

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NEW IBERIA — A company here has signed contracts with 14 farmers to raise sweet sorghum for a new $100 million refinery.

Agrifuels Refining Corp. will use processed sorghum to make ethanol, which can be used to replace lead in gasoline and to boost the fuel’s octane level. Federal law is phasing out leaded gasoline.

The company also has signed a contract with the M.A. Patout and Son Ltd. Enterprise sugar mill of Patoutville to process the sorghum, according to Patrick Hamilton, Agrifuels president.

Hamilton said the farmers will grow a total of 2,000 acres of sorghum this year in five parishes. However, he said, the company expects that it eventually will require 80,000 acres of sorghum, grown by as many as 200 farmers.

He said this is the first time that sweet sorghum will be produced on a large-scale commercial basis.

“The program is important to the farmer because it offers him a fixed price and guaranteed market going in, and complete payment on harvesting,” Hamilton said.

LSU and the University of Southwestern Louisiana are conducting research on the cultivation methods, he said.

Daniel Viator of Youngsville was one of the 14 farmers who signed a contract with Agrifuels. Viator said the company has agreed to pay $25 per ton for the crop, which takes some of the risk out of farming.

“We just don’t know how many tons we can produce,” he said.

The crop is planted in April and harvested in August in the same manner as sugarcane, he said, which will give farmers more use of their equipment.

The plant resembles sugarcane, although it’s taller, Viator said. The sucrose level is uniform throughout the sorghum plant, he said, while the sucrose level in sugarcane is higher in the bottom of the stalk.

This year, Viator said, Agrifuels will buy the harvest and store it until the refinery, located near New Iberia, begins production next year. The 1986 crop will serve as a pilot program to learn more about sorghum, he said.