In-flight training

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Ron and Phyllis Walsh watch drop testing while resting on the wing of their Air Tractor-802.

Pilot Hollis Gooch, right, watches as mechanic Kendall Broussard adjusts his plane's drop chute.

Eddie Eskew sights in the drop height of Stanley Hebert Jr. in his AG-Cat-II aircraft at LaCrosse Airport recently.

Acadiana cropdusters work at precision flying, spraying

ESTERWOOD — Cropdusting the fields of Acadiana by plane is not as easy as it looks. It calls for precision flying and knowing exactly where the stuff is supposed to land.

On Thursday and Friday of last week, approximately 30 cropduster pilots gathered at LaCrosse Airport, south of here, to conduct tests aimed at improving the accuracy and efficiency of their application equipment.

Ronnie Levy, a Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service county agent in Acadia Parish, said the information gathered during the fly-by tests is used to see how evenly and accurately a plane disperses fertilizer and other products.

"These pilots are fine-tuning their application equipment much as a marksman might sight-in a rifle," Levy said. "Cropduster pilots want to be sure that they are applying their loads in the right quantity and where it is intended."

Darryl Reeter, a LCCS engineering specialist, who is conducting a series of nine "fly-in" test programs statewide, said the object of the tests is "to assist aerial applicators to do a better job."

A series of 29 brackets holding 3-foot-by-3-foot canvas bags are placed, side-by-side across the runway. Pilots then fly over the bags, releasing fertilizer which is caught in the bags.

The plane's altitude and speed are calibrated along with the weight of the fertilizer collected in each bag to determine how uniformly the plane is applying its load.

"Pattern testing is absolutely necessary," said Hollis Gooch, a pilot who works the Abbeville area. "The results from the tests help us to maintain a quality level of work."

Gooch said when he approaches a farmer to solicit work he often shows them the results of his test. He said it gives farmers confidence "that we're doing a good job."

H. "Skew" Hudson, owner/operator of the Mowata Flying Service in Eunice and President of the Louisiana Agricultural Aviation Association, said the fly-by tests are a valuable marketing tool for individual pilots and flying services.

"Farmers want to be sure that the seed, fertilizer, agro-chemicals and other products they have bought are being applied properly," Hudson said. "Our business is trying to improve its image and this type of testing affords us an opportunity to do that."

Reeter said approximately 75 percent of the state's 841 agricultural aircraft were tested in 1992.

The fly-in program also provides pilots with a manual outlining the procedures for chemical use and flight safety, spot checks for aircraft, routine safety guidelines and advanced educational training to re-certify pilots for application of restricted-use chemicals.