Acadiana’s renewable resource: Farming

By Pamela Glisson
Business Writer

As farmers in Acadiana consider the coming years, there’s something they hope they’ll see in addition to good weather. They’re hoping, like Rodney Dangerfield, for a little respect.

“Right now, people don’t really appreciate the farmer,” said Alfred Guidry in St. Martin Parish.

“Most people who are not involved in agriculture have no idea how much it means, particularly to this area,” said Dr. Donald Fontenot, St. Mary Parish county agent.

“Grass would grow in the streets of Franklin without agriculture.”

Agent Ronnie Levy in Acadia is of the same mind and claims of farming in general, “It’s probably the most important thing in the economy here in Acadia Parish.”

John Mire, county agent in Evangeline, said, “The parish economy is not solely based in agriculture, but it’s the major industry.”

Agent Keith Normand said agriculture is king in St. Landry Parish, and agent Norris Grabert claimed offarming in Iberia, “It’s the backbone.”

In fact, Iberia also may serve as a model for public cooperation. Grabert said the attitude of the general public and local governmental bodies is solidly pro-agriculture in Iberia.

Gross farm value speaks for itself. “In a good year, the agricultural economy brings in $50 million to this parish,” said Guidry of St. Martin. County agent Cecil McCrory says agriculture in Vermilion Parish was worth $84 million in ‘91. "Everybody’s on hold now,” waiting hopefully for a better year, said Keith Normandy, county agent in St. Landry, which has the unfortunate distinction of claiming soybeans as its major crop.

In the past decade, St. Martin already has switched its main crop from soybeans to sugar cane, and other parishes also are gaining land in sugar cane, though that trend now is limited by state mill capacity.

Alfred Guidry

Iberia is into kenaf, a new-wave fiber crop, and St. Mary may soon follow suit. Old grain crops such as corn, oats, and milo also are seeing an acreage boost, thanks to recent good prices.

Cotton has seen downs in recent years and now is seeing a wary — however seesaw — rise again.

As Guarino put it, “Everybody — they’re just grasping for something new.”

Meanwhile, farmers in general face concerns ranging from pesticide usage to reduction in farmland to the North American Free Trade Agreement to waning interest in the physical labor that some farming still involves.

"Agriculture right now is kind of in a lull," said Guidry.

But he added, “Farming is naturally going to continue. I think the trend is going to be bigger and better farmers, simply because of economics. The bigger farmer is the one that’s going to survive.”

Despite hard times, Mire in Evangeline said one thing sure: "The resiliency of American farmers is second to none."