Ag director hopes to grow knowledge

By CARL REDMAN
Capital news bureau

Agriculture is not the driving force behind the state's economy, and the new director of the LSU Agricultural Center's Experiment Station doesn't argue that it ever will be. However, Oran Little is quick to point out that agriculture has an important role to play in Louisiana's economy and that role can be strengthened with the proper mix of scientific and economic research.

With abundant water resources and a climate that lends itself to double cropping — growing two different crops a year on the same ground — Louisiana is in an excellent position to compete with other states for agricultural dollars, Little said.

"We have to ask the question: what can agriculture be?" Little said. "It doesn't make sense to dwell on the past and say what has it been or what it has not been. We should not approach agriculture as developing the industry at the expense of something else."}

Little from Louisiana farmers instead of sending their money to California or Delaware, they would keep the money moving through the local economy, he said.

Agriculture is changing — it's a career that requires the best and brightest, demanding as much sophisticated training as medicine or engineering, Little said.

Like many other industries, agriculture has become a knowledge business.

On one level, researchers are looking for solutions to farmers' problems — like developing drought-resistant crop varieties — and at another level, researchers are trying to anticipate problems and be ready with answers before the problem appears in the field.

Agricultural research is moving very rapidly, and farmers need as much information as possible to make the best use of the latest technology available, Little said.

"What we need to do is determine who depend on agriculture?" Little said. "We won't come up with a magic crop that will revolutionize agriculture in Louisiana. There will be some growth in new crop areas. Vegetable production will be one of them. Forage livestock has a tremendous potential.

I don't have my mind set that the future is dedicated to just this or that."

The first objective of Louisiana farmers should be to make the state self-sufficient in specific commodities, Little said. Why should Louisiana send its money to California in exchange for broccoli if farmers here can supply the state's needs? he asked.

"The money is in any market you can find," Little said. "We have to look for new markets for international-type commodities — soybeans, rice, corn — and those have to be looked at worldwide.

On the other hand, you have another strength from the standpoint that the markets themselves might be in your own hometown — if you become more competitive with where the produce is coming from now."

If Louisiana farmers supply the food needs of Louisiana residents, they can keep Louisiana dollars inside the state. For example, if Louisiana residents could purchase vegetable catsup processors will be interested in locating here. But it's not the research center's function to do the feasibility studies of plant sites for the processor. We are in the knowledge business and we can make the processor aware of the resources here."

As a boy growing up in Schuylkill, Texas, Little milked a lot of Jersey cows, participated in activities sponsored by Future Farmers of America and ate a plenty of the good German sausage his hometown takes pride in.

Working on scholarship from the Marshall Foundation, Little earned a bachelor's degree in general agriculture, economics and biology from the University of Houston, went into biochemistry and earned a Ph.D. in animal nutrition, biochemistry and veterinary physiology from Iowa State University in 1960.

Little joined the faculty of the University of Kentucky in 1960 and worked his way up through the ranks to become associate dean for research and associate director of the UK Agricultural Experiment Station in 1969.

Today, Little is reading reports, visiting agricultural research stations around Louisiana and trying to develop a taste for crawfish.