Agriculture activists tout farm movement in South, Louisiana

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Agriculture activists tout farm movement in South, Louisiana.

AAM believes farmers should get a fair price from the marketplace, he said.

By DIC\n
Advocate staff writer

What is a “family farm?”

David Senter, national director of the American Agriculture Movement, which talks a lot about the family farm in the United States, says first of all it has nothing to do with size of the enterprise.

Senter defined a “family farm” as a farm “in which the family unit provides 100 percent of the management and some of the labor.”

Senter and Missouri farmer Wayne Cryts, national AAM vice president, were in Louisiana recently to help recruit members.

One stop was a Camelot Club reception for legislators and other state officials to make the AAM’s presence known.

The AAM is a new organization compared to the older and larger Farm Bureau, but Senter said the AAM is having extremely good luck in Louisiana, where AAM has not been as strong as in the Midwest.

David McCarty, a Morehouse Parish farmer, is president of the AAM in Louisiana.

“The time is ripe for us in the South,” Senter said.

Many farmers were not happy with the 1985 farm bill, he said, predicting a serious income loss for farmers if the new farm bill now before Congress continues the 1985 bill’s approach to farm programs.

Senter said that if Congress freezes target prices and loan rates — major components of the government’s commodity supports — and does not provide for increasing costs, there will be a major income drain.

“Farmers could lose 30 percent of their income” over the five-year life of the next bill because of inflation and other increasing costs, Senter said.

Senter agreed better times have come at least to some farmers. In cotton, he said, farmers are closer to their cash flow. “It is an uneasy economy,” he said.

Livestock producers also are getting better prices now, he said.

But Senter said soybeans remain a big problem and soybean farmers need a support program similar to what other major crops have. He said the United States is losing too many soybean acres.

Senter said AAM wants the non-farming public to understand farm programs are not welfare.

“We want to make sure people understand why farm programs are there and what they were designed for,” he said. A major reason for the farm programs is to take the boom-or-bust cycle out of agriculture, he said.

By DIC\n
Advocate staff writer

AAM believes farmers should get a fair price from the marketplace, he said.

The AAM is working more within the system today than it has in some of its 10-year history, both Senter and Cryts said. Cryts made news in the past decade when he removed his soybeans from a bankrupt grain elevator against a judge’s order.

AAM now has a Washington office, but only a three-person staff. Senter said AAM believes farmers should come to Washington to lobby their causes, rather than hiring paid lobbyists. “We believe nobody can represent farmers better than they can represent themselves,” he said.

The AAM isn’t ruling out the public protest, but Senter said there are no plans for “tractor parades” to Washington or other such tactics that disrupt and block traffic.

“Alot of people consider us still being activists. I believe we are activists within the system,” Senter said. “We want to be active both on the state level as well as the national level.”

Cryts said AAM believes farmers have to get involved in politics because politics has such an impact on farming.

Decisions made in Washington have more impact on the bottom line than a farmer’s farming or management skills, he said.

Both Cryts and Senter stressed the importance of farmers talking to other social groups, especially environmentalists and conservationists.

Senter said he was the only representative of an agricultural organization invited to address the Earth Day observance in Washington, D.C., April 22. He said he was well received.

Cryts said, “We’ve got to deal with the political reality as it is,” and the environmentalists are not all wrong.

But he said environmentalists should understand that when a farmer switches to a new technique, it almost always involves investment and the farmer must get a better price for his product.

AAM wants to block foreign produce grown with pesticides banned in the United States, and it wants better enforcement of laws intended to catch contaminated produce from other countries, Cryts and Senter said. It also wants a labeling law for produce showing what is U.S. grown and foreign grown.

Senter said the environmental and conservation movement gets stronger every year, but farmers must still carry out their agriculture.

“I believe we’ve got to make allies of them,” Senter said.