Agriculture development key to state's future

ROSEPINE—Further development of agriculture in the state is one of the potential solutions to Louisiana's economic woes, said State Rep. Allen Bradley of DeRidder, speaking at field day here recently.

"The current discussions in the Legislature in the area of economic development deal with taking the natural resources that are presently available in the state and maximizing those. That's where agriculture comes in," Bradley, a member of the House Committee on Agriculture, told those attending the field day at the Rosepine Research Station, a branch of the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station.

Speaking on "Louisiana Agriculture and the Legislature," Bradley called attention to warnings given 15-20 years ago that Louisiana could not depend indefinitely on financing government from oil and mineral revenues. "The most recent crisis - the freefall of the price of oil - has brought these predictions to reality," he said.

"In making decisions in this legislative session, we must consider not only the short-term solutions but also the long-term ones - the change of our economic base, our tax base and our spending practices - to conform with reality," Bradley pointed out.

He noted that the traditional economic incentives in the form of tax exemptions and tax-free bonds for manufacturing have not always been effective in creating new jobs for Louisiana workers.

Bradley said that in a recent meeting of the House agriculture committee, discussions centered around marketing aspects of agricultural products.

"We talked about the fact that we produce large amounts of seafood, yet we do little or no processing of seafood in the state. We produce a lot of pork and could produce more. We have one producer headquartered in Louisiana who gets 72 percent of his eggs outside the state, even though there are egg producers in the state who could supply them. We have milk processors who are shipping in raw milk from other states to process in Louisiana, when we have dairymen who are having difficult times with markets."

"These are kinds of problems we face, and I think it's through economic development and planning in these areas that the future tax base of Louisiana will come," Bradley said.

He added that research which goes in the statewide system of the Agricultural Experiment Station is a vital cog and the key to being able to do the preparatory work so that we can have a healthy agricultural industry.

"I'm not telling you that at this time, when agriculture in the nation is facing serious problems, that agriculture in Louisiana is going to be the key to total economic development in the state," he continued. "But I think those of us who come from rural Louisiana recognize that agriculture is still the No. 1 utilization if Louisiana is going to make progress in the future."

Bradley said he is finding support for agriculture among his fellow legislators. In adopting subcommittee recommendations on possible budget cuts, the House Committee on Appropriations recently included a reduction of only $1.6 million from agricultural programs out of $429.5 million in total cuts.

In response to Bradley's comments, Chancellor H. Rouse Caffey of the LSU Agricultural Center said the Legislature has been "very responsible and responsive to the needs of agriculture." He pointed out that last year the Agricultural Center was targeted for a $4 million cut, but the Legislature restored that and then added "a little more because you saw the need for something other than traditional agriculture."

"You said production agriculture is needed, but we must develop those products that lead to "value-added" processing," Dr. Caffey said. "So you funded statewide programs in aquaculture and commercial vegetables.

"Agriculture will continue," he said, "but with a different direction. We've been content with plant and animal agriculture, forestry and fisheries in producing it in Louisiana, but then we send the products to other states for processing. You're going to see some changes."