Ag officials here urge disaster bill

By Pamela Glisson
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American farmers of wheat, barley, and oats in 1991 will receive about $1.45 billion in crop subsidy payments, according to Agriculture Secretary Edward Madigan.

But agricultural officials in Louisiana say the funds do not diminish the need for a separate farm disaster bill still in limbo. “I don’t think that’s enough money,” said Bob Odom, state Commissioner of Agriculture.

James Trahan, director of the Lafayette office of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, added of local farmers, “A lot of people are really, really in bad shape. We’re not talking about people making a profit. We’re just talking about survival.”

Trahan said getting adequate funding through federal disaster aid could make or break many of the state’s farmers. “Louisiana really took it on the chin in 1991,” he said. “All these people are asking for is just a chance to stay in business.”

Odom said any other type of farm assistance program doesn’t carry nearly the weight of federal disaster aid. “Really and truly, you can talk about all the other programs, and they’re not worth a nickel,” he said. “They’re all rhetoric.”

Trahan said the crop subsidy payments, to be administered locally through his office, are a routine event based on below average crop prices. He added that they won’t have much influence here because the targeted crops – wheat, oats, and barley – do not have a large presence in Acadiana.

Because of farmers’ desire to spin off from lesser producing crops such as soybeans, Trahan said local wheat acreage is increasing. But he explained that receipt of crop subsidy payments also is contingent on farmers’ participation in federal acreage restrictions – a system not economically feasible for new wheat farmers.

Soybean farmers have suffered the most, Trahan said, pointing out that they need federal disaster relief more than anyone. He added that farmers have experienced a cumulative effect because 1989 also was a tough year.

Odom also claimed that soybean acreage is down substantially this year – that much more notable since last year’s gross farm production of $263 million already was estimated by the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service as “the lowest in some years.”

Sugar cane production also is down, according to Odom, who estimates it’s running at 95 percent of previous years’ records. Excessive rains earlier this year, as well as an early freeze this fall, were the main culprits, he said.

Trahan said he hopes federal disaster coverage will be issued by the start of next year. Remaining questions, he said, are based not so much in getting funds, but in the amount of funds to be issued.

Although a $1.75 million package is in order, he said President Bush could be the key to actual funds allotted, since he could result in issuing about half the total amount only at his discretion.

Crop subsidy payments, on the other hand, should be dispensed shortly.

In the long-term, Odom said he hopes for one of two outcomes: 1) the development of a more diversified farmers’ insurance program, or 2) elimination of insurance programs in favor of disaster aid only.

Farmers’ insurance programs now are based on a parish-average basis, Odom said, explaining that the group system does not always work in favor of individual farmers. Produce, he added, isn’t insured at all, either locally or nationally.

He concluded of the average farmer, “He needs to be able to insure that crop just like you insure your house.”