Agro-Flex Offers Chance To Diversify Farming Systems

Agro-Flex is a thirteenth rural economic development program. The area includes all parishes of Southwestern Louisiana from the Atchafalaya River to the Sabine River. In regard, Allen, Evangeline and St. Landry Parishes on the north to the Gulf of Mexico.

The ambitious program’s first objective is to diversify the farming systems of the area to include higher income enterprises, such as fruit and vegetable production or aquaculture, and the introduction of new crops which compliment the current crops grown in the area. The second objective is to encourage value-added manufacturing which includes any raw product produced in the area, including seafood, timber, fur, food or by-products. The program includes wildlife management, water and marsh management, and tourism.

The success of a successful program would be felt in every community, in no small measure. For this reason, Agro-Flex is actively recruiting support from agricultural and nonagricultural communities, including banks, utilities, farm bureaus, commodity groups, wholesale and retail farm supply companies, and commerce and others. All interested parties in the thirteen parishes are considered ex-officio members, and stages are being taken to encourage an active role in their community.

LSU and L.S.U. have already begun an active role in supporting the research, development and educational aspects of Agro-Flex. The universities will play vital roles in areas such as “Think Tank” and “Brain Storming” sessions to identify specific research or extension activities. Marketing and entrepreneurial management will take on a new and expanded role in the region. The engineering departments and U.S.L.’s CAD/CAM Center should play an important role in actively searching for improved productivity through transfers of existing technologies or the design of new technologies. Food science professionals will take on a broader role in reshaping our concepts of food manufacturing by bringing new products and processing methods.

Aquaculture is a very obvious area to concentrate upon for this region. We have only begun to develop this field. New harvesting, processing and marketing efforts will double or triple the acreage in ponds within five years. Catfish and crawfish are expanding rapidly, but some of the aggressive growth may come from redfish or other salt-water species.

Recently researchers at L.S.U. removed 11 million eggs from only two redfish females in tanks at their Baton Rouge lab facilities. Within two to three years, commercial redfish production should be possible using these and other new techniques. Some of this production will not be near the brackish marshes, but farther inland in areas which have traditionally had salty well water. In fact, some of the redfish fin- gerlings were being produced in fresh water.

Several processing companies are actively working with growers to produce high quality vegetables for pickles, salads, canning or the fresh market. Mechanized cucumber production has begun near Lafayette and DeRidder. Processors can use several other crops from Louisiana, such as cabbage, sweet corn and peppers. One company wants to encourage vine tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons and citrus in the area. Some of these crops are marketed through mail order advertising. Research needs to be conducted on production of fruit and vegetables on our peat and muck soils along our marshes. Some of these areas can produce redishes, carrots, leaf crops, sweet corn and sod (grass) crops.

Agro-Flex would like to see the pipeline companies and utility companies work together to fund a small research grant to determine if it is economically feasible to capture a portion of the huge amount of heat given off by large pumping stations or power plants, and transfer that heat to nearby aquaculture ponds or greenhouses. Heating is a major expense in greenhouses and is necessary in certain types of aquaculture like alligators. Some fish grow faster in warm water.

Most people have not heard of kenaf. Kenaf is an annual fiber crop which can be used in making paper, particularly newspaper. The United States imports over sixty percent of its newspaper, mostly from Canada. Research is currently underway in several states on kenaf production. Kenaf harvesting research is being conducted in Southwest Louisiana using modified sugarcane harvesting equipment. New, nonuphir processing technologies have been developed in Europe to allow mini-pulp mills to be used in palce of large mills. The mini-mills can also use rice straw and bagasse as partial substitutes for kenaf or traditional pulp wood.

Agro-Flex will hold its first annual meeting in Lafayette in October. The location and date will be determined when the keynote speaker is identified. Think tanks are being planned for the winter months. The membership drive will continue throughout fall and winter. Anyone interested in participating in any of the Agro-Flex enterprises can contact Chairman Joe Freeland, P.O. Box 247, Crowley, Louisiana 70527 or phone (318) 783-1702.