At UL Lafayette's farm in Cade, agriculture concepts come alive

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Brian Kibbe of Lafayette, beef farm manager at the UL Lafayette Model Sustainable Agricultural Complex, or Cade Farm, works recently with plastic wrap to cover a bale of wet hay as a farm implement spins the hay bale.

Pastures promote learning

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CADE — There is no such thing as office hours working amid nearly 300 cattle, a herd of horses, crawfish ponds and fields of research on the 600 acres that make up UL Lafayette's farm.

The cows don't wait to be milked between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. First call for 50 dairy cows is 4 a.m. They get milked again at 2 p.m. Here, there is no such thing as a vacation from the production or research.

Research is being conducted that deals with crawfish, climate changes, soil quality, best grazing management practices and organic farming. The outdoor classroom gives UL Lafayette students and others a hands-on look at a working farm.

"Where else can a student study a working dairy, sugar cane production and crawfish?" said Jay Huner, director of the Crawfish Research Center, which is housed at the farm.

The farm is known simply as "Cade Farm," but the key to its purpose lies more in its formal name, the "Model Sustainable Agricultural Complex," than the best management and conservation practices are researched and used.

Will Bernard, 15-year veteran at the Cade Farm, harvests crawfish recently from a pond at the facility outside of Cade.

By the numbers

UL Lafayette Model Sustainable Agricultural Complex:
- 14,000 — Contact hours with the public and students at the farm
- 600 — Acreage of the farm and number of round bales of hay used annually
- 120 — Beef cattle
- $75,000 — Money the sale of milk pours back into UL Lafayette's general fund
- 660,000 — Pounds of milk shipped to the creamery in a year
- 130 — Dairy cattle

See PASTURES on Page 3B
Pastures

In the past few years, the farm reduced its feed costs by slowly weaning its cattle off corn feed and allowing them to graze, said Mark Simon, the farm's operations manager.

Now, the animals are given feed only before calving or breeding. There are about 130 dairy cows and calves. The farm also raises about 120 beef cows and calves.

Simon has been working at the farm for the past 15 years. “The whole plan for this farm years ago was to become more sustainable and to survive in times of stress like we’re going through,” Simon said. “Ten years ago, we went through a 10 percent budget cut, and we were fine.”

Each year, the milk from the dairy cattle puts about $75,000 in the university’s general fund, Simon said. The dairy is one of three left in Acadiana, he said. The milk is sold to a creamery in the area.

About $15,000 is raised with the sale of the beef cattle each year, he said.

Last week, around 9 a.m., the dairy cows and their calves grazed in the pastures. Over a slight bump in the earth, tractors cut hay over flat lands. Across the farm, Will Bernard put his small aluminum skiff into the water to round up crawfish on the farm’s research ponds.

Bernard has worked on the farm for about 15 years. His family donated the farmland to the university 25 years ago. In the morning, Bernard suits up in his waders and runs the traps in the ponds. The farm has production ponds and research ponds to test the effect of various vegetation on the water quality and crawfish production.

With a consulting firm analyzing the farm’s operations and a budget cut looming, Huner said that any cut into the Crawfish Research Center’s funds would affect the center’s day-to-day operations.

The Crawfish Research Center’s budget is about $110,000 each year, with 80 percent of the funds comprising Huner and Bernard’s salaries, Huner said. During the past four seasons, the income from the crop has fluctuated between $25,000 and $46,000, Huner said.

Water quality and soil research are major components of research on the farm in partnership with the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality in an attempt to reduce sediment and pollutant run-off.

Colette Anzalone, the farm's education outreach coordinator, leads school groups out to the farm for agricultural challenges and workshops. Students are greeted to a 600-acre classroom, with learning stations set up at each research or development area.

In one of the pasture fields, a fence squares off a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Climate Reference Network Meteorological Station. The site is one of 250 stations across the country documenting hourly observations of temperature and precipitation.