The 1991 cotton crop in Louisiana was a record-breaker.

If rains and flooding at the prime planting time scared farmers, the rest of the year's weather in cotton-growing northeast Louisiana was tailor-made for the crop — a hot summer with rain when the growing cotton needed it and a long, dry fall when it was time to pick and gin.

While not every farmer had a good year, and several thousands of acres planned for cotton went unplanted because of the spring weather, the yield was a record state average of 825 pounds of cotton an acre — and 110 pounds more than in 1990 — according to the Agricultural Statistics Service.

Total Louisiana cotton production topped 1.4 million bales, also a state record, according to latest crop reports.

Louisiana farmers harvested 820,000 acres of cotton last year, the most since 1953, the statistics service reported.

"Cotton is king," said Dave Ruppenicker, Louisiana Farm Bureau associate commodity director who specializes in cotton and sugarcane.

Furthermore, Ruppenicker said, it appears cotton is going to remain king as far as being the crop that generates the most income for farmers.

Cotton prices have slumped since last spring, but Ruppenicker said good yields can help offset low prices.

Back in May, perhaps because the planting season looked uncertain, the cotton price in...
Cotton
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the delta states, including Louisiana, was 88 to 89 cents a pound, and a year ago the price was 69-70 cents. But this month the price is about 52 cents a pound.

Preliminary figures from the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service show gross farm income from cotton — the amount farmers received — was $488,263,547 for the 1991 crop, larger than any other field crop. Gross farm income for 1990’s crop was $422,527,800, according to extension service figures.

High production was the rule in all but three of the cotton producing states.

Total cotton production in the United States in 1991 is estimated at more than 18 million bales, almost 3 million bales more than the 1990 yield. In the mid-south Mississippi delta states, including Louisiana, the U.S. Department of Agriculture forecasts a production of 6.3 million bales. That would be 24 percent over 1990 production and the highest for the region in decades, according to the USDA.

Many Louisiana farmers also harvested high-quality cotton.

Ruppenicker said farmers put a big part of this year’s cotton under loan at a premium rate because of the high quality. Farmers can mortgage their crop to the government-chartered Commodity Credit Corp. as a way to hold it off the market if or until the prices rise, or they can forfeit it to the CCC. Base price under the loan program is just over 50 cents a pound.

Everything worked right for the crop that got planted in his area, said Bill Russell, county agent in Franklin Parish, heart of the northeast Louisiana cotton country. “I don’t think we ought to count on this again. No two years are the same.”

“We got rain in July and August, which is almost unheard of,” Russell said. “This cut down on the amount of irrigation needed. It contributed to this outstanding crop. Another big factor in northeast Louisiana was that we had less boll weevils, budworms and bollworms. We can take away 200 to 300 pounds per acre if you get them bad enough.”

Except in isolated cases, insects caused no big problems in Franklin this year, Russell said.

That was not the case in the Red River valley. Farmers there had have bad insect problems, Ruppenicker said.

Miles Brasher, Pointe Coupee Parish county agent, said a November freeze damaged cotton that was still green in his area. Early cotton fared all right, but the freeze ruined opened bolls before cotton had matured, he said.

The new Tri-Parish gin in the north end of Pointe Coupee ginned 17,743 bales in its first season, about 2,000 bales more than expected, according to Harold Lambert, a board member who oversaw startup of the gin.

Russell said Franklin Parish had 118,000 acres of cotton in 1991. But for the rain and flooding, it would have had 140,000 acres, he said.

**Other Crops.**

Here is how some other major Louisiana farm crops fared in 1991 compared to the previous year. The 1991 figures are the latest available from the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and the Agricultural Statistics Service, but in some cases they are preliminary and subject to revision.

**RICE:**
1991: 510,000 acres harvested. Yield, 24.7 million cwt. (100-pound measurements), or 4,850 pounds an acre. Rains adversely affected the crop, especially in the north Louisiana parishes. Gross farm value (amount paid to farmers), $196,605,720.

1990: 549,165 acres, 28,034,873 tons an acre. Total harvest was $182,200,000.

**SOYBEANS:**
1991: 950,000 acres harvested. Yield, 27,550,000 bushels; 29 bushels an acre. Total harvest was down 24 percent because of bad weather: the yield per acre was five bushels higher than in 1990 due to good growing and harvesting weather, according to the Agricultural Statistics Service. Gross farm value, $149,830,424.

1990: 1.7 million acres, 42.1 million bushels; 24 bushels an acre. Gross farm value, $263,000,000.

**SUGARCANE:**
1991: 345,000 acres harvested (321,000 for sugar, 24,000 for seed cane), 8,280,000 tons. Gross farm value, $197,084,337.

1990: 192,000 acres harvested, 4.6 million tons of cane, gross farm value not available. 1990 tonnage was almost half the 1989 and 1991 harvests because a December 1989 freeze killed or damaged dormant cane.

**CORN:**
1991: 247,000 harvested for grain; yield, 20,995,000 bushels, 25 bushels an acre average, or 31 bushels under the 1990 yield because of bad weather in the growing season. Gross farm value, $50,023,504.

1990: 193,000 acres, 23.3 million bushels; 116 bushels an acre. Gross farm value, $62.9 million gross farm value.

Several factors were at work to make an attractive crop, according to several sources.

Russell said even with prices dropping, cotton is still a farmer’s choice because the price of soybeans, the alternative for many farmers, remains around $5 a bushel, or below a profitable level. This year, he said he expects more “open end” cotton, or cotton grown and sold outside the government price support program.

Soybeans have no government price support, except a loan program with a price below $5 a bushel.

Cotton, on the other hand, has a “target price.” If the price of cotton falls below the target price — set at 72.9 cents a pound for 1992 — the government pays the farmer a “deficiency payment,” or the difference between the target price and an average market year price. Ruppenicker said the deficiency payment for the 1991 crop is 9.5 cents a pound, based on an average market price of 63.4 cents a pound.

Two things point to sluggish prices in the coming year.

The secretary of agriculture is raising the amount of cotton acreage that must be set aside and not planted for the coming season to 10 percent, double the 1991 acreage reduction. Farmers in the government program agree to USDA acreage limitations. In 1991, when cotton prices were up and stocks were down, the government imposed a 5 percent acreage reduction.

Ruppenicker said the advanced deficiency payment is a partial payment made early in the crop year — is expected to be 5.5 or six cents a pound, compared to four cents last year, indicating the US market is in better shape than the 1991 market. With cotton illness on the rise, prices are expected to be a decisive factor in this year’s crop.

Cotton demand has grown in recent years, according to government reports, due to “record economic growth” in the 1980s and consumers’ preference for cotton. The United States also competes for about 34 percent of the global cotton trade, according to the USDA. “Exports account for almost half of the U.S. crop and are vital to the stability of the U.S. market,” a USDA report says.

But even with expected higher mill use, the USDA’s outlook indicates cotton stocks are on the rise.

American cotton exports are forecast at 7.2 million bales this season, 600,000 bales fewer than last season, according to the outlook.

The U.S. export position is influenced by events in China, which has changed from an importer to an exporter of cotton (with the U.S. being its major supplier), and the former Soviet Union, which has been an exporter even though its cotton production has declined. “Additionally, the recent political breakup of the U.S.S.R. has renewed the practice of fire selling on world markets, which may affect world prices,” the report says.

“The role of international trade will probably be a decisive factor in this decade’s performance of the U.S. textile industry,” the report said.