Cotton and sugar cane '88 acreage expanding

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Sugar cane is moving northward again in Louisiana, cotton is coming south.

Encouraged by good prices and favorable government farm programs, more acres of both crops are expected in 1988, and the state's cotton acreage may hit its highest point in more than 10 years in 1988. Acres in rice, along with soybeans in both north and south Louisiana, are also expected to expand this year.

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Government farm programs, sugarcane acreage and south Louisiana, also is expected to expand this year. Acreage in rice, which is grown in both north and south Louisiana, also is expected to expand this year. Last year, sugar growers and factory owners enjoyed a good year, and sugar prices remain up. Louisiana cane growers had 324,000 acres last year. Acreage may top 300,000 this year, according to one estimate.

Cotton is expected to be planted in Pointe Coupee Parish in 1988 for the first time since the early 1970's. "We anticipate right around 3,000 acres," county agent Miles Brashear said. Cotton is also expected to increase in Aveloyelles Parish and Rapides Parish. County agent Ernest Freeman said he expects Aveloyelles cotton acreage will increase from about 2,900 acres last year to some 5,000 acres this year. Even more cotton was expected this year, but soybean prices the past few weeks has prompted farmers apparently are choosing soybeans because beans are easier and cheaper to grow than cotton, Freeman said.

If farmers continue to follow the indicated in a March survey - some 770,000 acres - the crop will once again bid to be king in Louisiana, outdistanced only by corn, Freeman said. "It's right up there with corn," Freeman said. "It's a good year for corn, but cotton is up too."

Thomas Burch, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service specialist, said Louisiana's hasn't grown more than 700,000 acres of cotton since 1954. Farmers planted 703,000 acres that year. The 770,000 acres projected for this year would be the largest amount in the past 30 years. 920,000 acres were planted in 1953, Burch said.

Cotton, sugar cane and rice prices are boosted by a combination of government programs and policy. In addition, cotton and rice were further helped by crop failures in other parts of the country. Cotton and rice have a marketing loan program, which seeks to put the commodities on the world market at prices that will make American growers a profit. Sugar is helped by import quotas that restrict the amount of cheap foreign sugar that can enter the United States. Louisiana's having three major cash crops with favorable government programs or policies has boosted the state's agricultural situation, according to Clyde St. Clergy, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service economist.

Overall, agriculture right now appears to be a bright spot in Louisiana's depressed economy. St. Clergy said he is "cautiously optimistic" in looking at farm prospects in 1988. Soybeans, the biggest Louisiana row crop in terms of acres, has had a good year, and as a crop, it has been troubled by poor prices and increased disease, pest and growing problems in recent years.

But soybean growers had a good harvest in 1987, and prices are up now due in part to a poor soybean crop in South America last year. Also helping U.S. agricultural products was a weakened dollar, which "made us a heck of a lot more competitive," St. Clergy said.

"So, we are sitting now in pretty good shape," he said.

But St. Clergy said he tries to get another point across. "With soybeans at almost $7 a bushel in November futures, in my view it is going to pull in the additional acres the trade is looking for," he said. U.S. farmers are aiming at about 55 million acres in soybeans this year, up from the 50 million acres planted last year. It is believed that the soybean acreage is down about 20 percent from the record of 67 million acres in 1979.

Rent for land, in some cases nearly $2 an acre, has made the soybean operation an especially profitable crop, compared with other normally grown crops. Producers are looking at opportunities to make money.

Since World War II, Louisiana cotton-growing has become concentrated in the Red River Valley area. At one time cotton was grown over much of the state. It is known that cotton can be grown in some of the southern parishes, including Pointe Coupee, Burch said. "It was once grown in Vermilion Parish as late as the mid-1970's."

High rainfall and hurricane damage were detrimental to cotton in south Louisiana, he said. New cotton growers also can quickly build up a government "base," or acreage covered by government support programs, he said. Most cotton growers are required to have a "base" in a crop over five years. Burch said a cotton grower can build up 100 percent base by having 100 acres in cotton in his fifth year. "For example, if a grower plants 1,000 acres this year, he can claim a $900 base in the next year and 100 percent base in years after that. The acreage limit continues until the only one year's crop completely outside government support programs."

Cotton Council figures show cotton fiber has gained dramatically as the consumer's choice of materials in recent years. Cotton commanded only a third of the fiber market in 1975, but now commands almost 50 percent, Burch said.

"It says people like cotton," Burch said.

David Stewart doesn't take credit for the expanding sugar cane acreage in Louisiana, but he has had a hand in nudging the state's sugar cane region northward again.

David Stewart is a sugar man. He doesn't have much luck growing grain or soybeans in Louisiana. "It was a bad experiment that didn't work out," he said. "I'm not going to say you can't beat sugar," he said. "But we've handled it." Stewart is the general manager of Alma, his family's sugar factory and plantation near Rougon in Pointe Coupee Parish. Stewart said Alma wants more sugarcane to grind.

Alma was a small mill, and since the early '80s when the Meeker mill near Alexandria closed, it has been at the northern edge of Louisiana's sugar cane country. Probably the northernmost cane sugar factory in the United States, Alma has a capacity of 175,000 tons of cane per day. He said the capacity is now 375,000 tons. American sugarcane growers benefit from sugar import quotas that limit the amount of cheaper foreign sugar that can enter the United States. The quotas are opposed by the U.S. sugar consuming industry.

Alma mill expanded state's cane area

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Stewart said U.S. sugar consumption increased last year for the first time in 15 years, and the industry expects to continue the increase. "With that, we're looking for an increase in import quotas," he said.

"In the last 15 years we have a domestic industry that is reliable," Stewart said. "Our opponents would have you think we are paying an exorbitant price for sugar when the price of sugar shipped from a six to eight world capital is almost 30 cents a pound."

At Alma, Stewart has bought more equipment and capacity is going to 185,000 tons of cane to day to more than 5,000 a day. Alma plantation has 2,000 acres of sugar cane itself. Stewart said the company employs about 30 people in the off-season, and about 125 people during the growing season.

The total worth of 375,000 tons of cane to the growers and the sugar factory, which Stewart says Alma can sell at a profit, is a $13 million.

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