Demand doubles value of Louisiana cotton crop

By TOM GUARISCO
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Urgent worldwide demand for cotton has helped Louisiana farmers, and agriculture officials say they will prosper even more if they can wipe out the farmers' No. 1 pest, the boll weevil.

Louisiana's cotton crop nearly doubled in value in 1994. It could grow again if the cotton farmers approve a plan to eradicate the boll weevil.

Each acre of Louisiana cotton yielded 809 pounds in 1994, U.S. Department of Agriculture figures show.

Cotton prices recently hit $1.10 per pound. The total state crop was worth $529 million in 1994.

With 4,700 Louisiana cotton producers, the average crop value to each producer was $11.2 million.

"There was more acreage and there was a real good crop," said Boyd Holley, a farmer who owns and works about 1,000 acres of cotton near Bastrop. "I think we had one of highest yields" on record.

Holley said 1994 was successful largely because of strong worldwide demand for cotton. The success came despite the fact boll weevils are still at large in Louisiana cotton fields.

The insect, which depends on cotton to live, bores into the plants and ruins them.

Several states have undertaken bold initiatives to wipe out boll weevils altogether. The projects have worked, and some of those states have seen their cotton acreage double because of it.

Louisiana farmers are now casting mail-in ballots on such a plan in Louisiana. It would involve several years of thorough spraying geared to kill every boll weevil. The catch is they have to help pay for it. The votes will be tallied Wednesday.

Holley said he voted for the plan. However, he said it will not have such a profound impact on Louisiana cotton farming.

"I really don't know there's a whole lot more good land that can be put into cotton," Holley said.

Larry Michaud, a spokesman for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, said there is plenty of land that could be switched to cotton, the highest cash-producing crop in Louisiana.

Other states have completely turned their cotton crops around by killing off boll weevils, Michaud said.

"All of that exploding cotton is pivoting around boll weevil eradication programs, where yields have mushroomed, chemical usage has plunged 60 and 70 percent, and land values have shot up," Michaud said.

There were 1.1 million acres of soybeans in Louisiana in 1994, Michaud said, much of which its farmers can switch to cotton, he said.