Despite ballyhoo, kenaf market 'a struggle' for local processors

By Pamela Glisson Crowley
Assistant Business Editor

Kenaf has been, in recent years, one of the state's freshest forays in agriculture. It even sets an example, in that it is processed here in Louisiana, rather than sent out.

But even given all the glamour and experimentation, it still hasn't found a significant place here.

"Right now we're struggling," said Linda Delano, secretary-treasurer of Natural Fibers of Louisiana, Inc. Delano said the company, which processes kenaf, suffers from a lack of big buyers as well as inadequate government help. It opened in January 1992 in Jeanerette.

According to Delano, Natural Fibers creates animal bedding and oil absorbents from kenaf. "The animal bedding sells, but you can't live on the animal bedding," she said.

What company officials hope is that in the near future they will net more business from major companies for their oil absorbents. Getting such business, explained Delano, is a slow process since large companies are often reluctant to make changes.

She said most kenaf products are sold to Texas, with some also going to Mississippi, North Carolina, California, Illinois, and Alabama. Texas and Mississippi grow and process their own kenaf, but they buy oil absorbents from Louisiana because Harold Willett has a patent on them.

Willett, who has a more than 40 year history in the sugar cane industry, is the person who first initiated kenaf here. His consulting firm, H. Willett & Associates, worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop a harvester for the crop. What resulted, along with the start of planting in '88, was a patent for him and his son, Christopher Willett.

Natural Fibers, so far, is the state's only operation for kenaf processing, and the crop has been grown mainly in Iberia Parish. Research planting also has been done at the Iberia Research Station, the Rice Research Station in Crowley, and the Red River Research Station in Bossier City.

Based on those studies, the spring 1994 issue of Louisiana Agriculture magazine speculates that kenaf, which has a present market value of $55 ton, "could be sufficiently profitable for some farmers to produce it." In fact, the magazine reported that additional processing plants are already being considered.

But in Jeanerette, only 100 acres of kenaf were planted in May, with an August harvest expected. And Delano said about 1,400 tons of kenaf still sit in fields from the past couple years' growth.

If the crop is stacked correctly, she said it doesn't mildew — good thing, since demand hasn't been strong enough to warrant processing of all that sits.

Meanwhile, the gross farm value for 1992 and 1993 kenaf remains undetermined until all the crop is processed and sold.

On the positive side, USL staff are now funded by a grant to research the use of kenaf in developing oil containment booms. A myriad of other uses for the crop already have been determined: carpet fibers, erosion control mats, styrofoam peanuts, newsprint, fabric, fertilizer mats, cordage, lawn-seed, potting soil component, and paper.