Despite smaller harvest, sugar cane season enjoyed record recovery rate

The 2016 Louisiana sugar cane season produced less cane than the year before but squeezed out a record amount of sugar per ton of cane. "Tonnage was really light, but we blew the roof off sugar recovery," said Ken Gravois, LSU AgCenter sugar cane specialist.

The harvest produced an average of 31.5 tons per acre, down 2 tons from last year. Prices held steady around 26 cents a pound, he said. Acreage increased to 431,000 in Louisiana, up by 21,000 from the previous year, with most of the increase from the north and west sides of the growing area, Gravois said.

Blair Hebert, LSU AgCenter county agent in Iberia Parish, said the light tonnage of sugar cane was a disappointment, but that was offset by the record sugar recovery rate. "All things considered, we're pleased," he said.

Last year's harvest was the opposite of 2016-17. "The tonnage was tremendous last year. But we were in the mud every day, and it was an expensive crop," he said.

Stuart Gauthier, LSU AgCenter county agent in St. Martin Parish, said the August flooding didn't seem to affect the cane. "It's ironic we had some cane impacted by the flood, but probably more of the cane was impacted by the drought," he said.

The August floods did delay planting. Then there was dry weather until early December. That combination has led to "spotty strands of plant cane," Gravois said. Farmers won't have a good handle on the plant cane until the spring.

Recent cold weather won't damage the young crop. Instead, the low temperatures could help it by reducing insect populations and decreasing disease severity, he said.

Jimmy Flanagan, LSU AgCenter county agent in St. Mary Parish, said the year was better than average. "All in all, I think everybody is breathing a sigh of relief," he said.

Advocate staff report