Excessive rainfall hurting farmers

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As the rain continues to fall, so do farmers’ hopes for a bumper crop.

Many crops in the field are suffering from excessive moisture, agricultural officials complain, and fields have been so saturated that farmers who haven’t planted are being forced to wait on temperamental Mother Nature.

Cotton, the state’s biggest cash crop, which totaled $422 million last year, was expected to be a big moneymaker for 1991 with high prices. But the rain is taking care of that, according to the State Agriculture Department.

The drought in California has terminated the cotton crop there, and a worldwide shortage of cotton stockpile exists, further increasing prices, he said.

In April, Louisiana cotton farmers had high hopes of taking advantage of those high prices, but the only thing that’s remained high has been the water. Approximately 80 percent of the state’s cotton crop remains to be planted, even though the optimum planting date of May 10 passed a week ago. Cotton planting could wait as late as June 10, but the estimated reduction in yield would be 51 percent, he said.

Most fields in the northern part of the state are so saturated that they will not be dry enough for planting for at least another month, Larry Michael, Agriculture Department spokesman said.

Many farmers were planning to switch from raising the food-processed soybeans to cotton, Michael said, but many are rethinking that transition.

Even rice, usually thought of as a water-loving crop, is suffering from excessive moisture in some areas of the state, he said.

The sugarcane crop in St. Mary Parish and much of the state is stranded in muddy fields, in need of immediate fertilizing, said Donad Fontenot, St. Mary Parish crop consultant.

It had to go to May to plant due to the heavy rains in the area, the farmers here are finished with fertilizing,” he said.

However, it’s too early to write off this year’s crop as a disaster, he said.

“A couple of weeks of the same old, same old, and we’re in trouble,” Fontenot said.

Because of the soggy fields, farmers will have to use crop dusters to apply fertilizer.

“It’s expensive and not very effective,” he said.

Fertilizing is usually applied directly to the ground, he said, but aerial application is susceptible to being carried away by prevailing winds.

But even if farmers could get into the fields now, the machinery would break much of the cane, Fontenot said, because it’s so late into the season.

Soybean planting has been delayed, but farmers can use varieties of early-maturing beans which can be planted as late as June 15, said Walter Morrison, state soybean specialist with the LSU Agricultural Extension Service.

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“We still have plenty of time,” he said.

But much of the land to be planted in beans has not been prepared, he said, and weeds have begun to take root in the cotton fields.

More herbicides will have to be used to combat weeds, he said.

We’re looking at a delayed planting season (for soybeans) for sure,” said Keith Normand, St. Landry Parish crop consultant.

Corn and wheat are suffering worse, Morrison said, noting that he’s seen several fields of yellow corn instead of fertile soil. But, in the case of sugarcane, farmers can’t get in the fields, he said.

Normand said corn can’t tolerate long periods of standing water.

A lot of the (corn) fields really look bad,” Normand said.

Normand said rice isn’t suffering in St. Landry Parish, as opposed to the crop in north Louisiana, because the water level can be controlled with pumping.

Michael said the winter wheat crop was to be harvested this month. The production of soaked fields have been hit limits to machinery. The wheat stalks are getting knocked down from winds and heavy rains, he said.

Michael said some farmers with well-drained fields will be able to plant. They simply haven’t had the crops in areas that have sandy soils. But most can only wait until the rain stops and the water drains.

Rainfall amounts throughout the state are double or triple normal. For example, the Lafayette area normally averages 19 inches of rain so far in 1991, and an average total of 34 inches has fallen so far in 1991, Michael said. In other comparisons:

- North Louisiana, which should average 21 inches, has received an average of 34 inches.
- Southwest Louisiana, the driest area of the state, which averages 19 inches, has received an average of 27 inches.

The Reserve area in St. John the Baptist Parish has received a whopping 54 inches, compared to its average of 21 inches.

Central Louisiana, with an average of 21 inches, has received 33 inches.

In more places, it has at least doubled, Michael said.

A total of 29 counties have been declared a disaster area. Michael said the farmers in those parishes eligible for special interest loans.

The state and federal governments are too financially strapped to take on more debt, he said.

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