Farm research program facing stiff opposition

By PETER SHINKLE
Advocates staff writer

NEW IBERIA — A federal research program aimed at helping farmers curb use of pesticides and fertilizers has a tiny share of the nation's agricultural research budget and faces strong opposition from chemical companies, the head of the research program said Saturday.

The research effort, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, has just $1.1 million to fund projects this year in the South, far less than the roughly $500 million in total funding for agricultural research stations in the same area, said Dr. Bill Brown, the program's director.

"This program, with the funding it has now, is not going to have a heck of an impact," Brown said.

But the concept of sustainable agriculture has drawn a body of dedicated adherents including farmers tired of paying high prices for chemicals, health food enthusiasts and environmentalists worried about fish kills. Along the way, the concept has polarized agricultural research and divided American farmers.

"If we reduce the amount of pesticide use... farmers are no longer going to be efficient," warned Ronald Gonsoulin, a sugar cane farmer who attended the meeting where Brown spoke. Gonsoulin argued that farmers are already seeking to reduce their expenditures on chemicals and Brown's program "may be somewhat redundant."

When Congress first established the SARE program in 1988, it drew sharp opposition from companies that produce fertilizers and pesticides, Brown told those gathered at an Iberia Parish hotel to discuss the agricultural reform movement.

"Companies who are in the business of making and marketing agricultural chemicals were some of the loudest opponents," he said. "They didn't look at the goals," he said, adding that the firms were concerned about their "livelihood."

"There's still some of that thinking around," he said in response to a question about why the program's funding level was not higher.

Brown made his remarks to a meeting of the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, an association of farmers and activists from across the South trying to develop new methods to raise crops and livestock with less fertilizer and pesticide.

Some of the farmers said they are deeply concerned about what they say is the country's increasing dependence on pesticides, and said the federal sustainable agriculture program is not doing enough to help farmers reduce their reliance on the chemicals.

The SARE program will soon select about 25 projects from 227 proposals from researchers across the South, Brown said. The program is looking for projects that prevent erosion through new tillage methods, reduce use of chemicals and curb pollution and protect fish and wildlife habitat. "The program needs good, documentable science," he said.

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Some farmers charged that the program will benefit mostly university researchers and is not designed to give farmers a chance to develop projects that will help them wean their farms from chemicals.

Brown replied that there are farmers on the team that will select the 25 projects. Still, some participants questioned whether those farmers were dedicated to sustainable agriculture.

“I would like to see some of the dollars spent directly on the farm. The farmer is the steward of the land,” said Jackie Judice, a sugar cane farmer from Iberia Parish. “We know what needs to be done, but it takes dollars to get you through the lax period.”

Judice said he is developing a machine to redistribute crushed cane stalks, known as bagasse, over cane fields, keeping down weeds and allowing him to use less herbicide. The machine would make bagasse useful, while burning of the waste material has drawn opposition locally.

Another Iberia Parish farmer, Carl Viator, said he has used a natural method to battle insects known as borers that damage sugar cane. Viator said he has preserved the insect’s natural enemy, the red ant. That has enabled him to avoid use of azinphos-methyl, the pesticide that caused or contributed to about 15 fish kills last summer.

“Farmers think the environmentalists are after us. But I don’t think they are. I think they’re out to help us,” Viator said.

He said his family has been “conservative” by trying to use as little pesticide as possible, and he has sometimes turned to his aging uncle for a tip about old farming ways.

Indeed, some sustainable agriculture proponents said American farming has undergone a perilous transformation with the rapid development of farm chemicals that began in the 1950s. For example, 11 percent of corn fields were treated with herbicides in 1956, and by 1988, that figure had grown to 96 percent, according to data presented at the conference.

John Burns, who grows pesticide-free vegetables in Virginia, said he is opposed to a federal program that has $4 million for research on making crops more resistant to herbicide.

“It will allow you to put more herbicides on so you won’t have to worry about burning your soybean crop,” he said.