Farmers consider leaving the land because of low prices, new rules

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ABBEVILLE — Periodic seminars on pesticides or crop varieties might bring a couple of dozen farmers to the county agent's office. But a meeting on how to get out of farming drew a standing-room-only crowd of more than 100 concerned producers here Tuesday.

The turnout illustrated a troubling reality for today's agricultural industry. Farmers all over Acadiana, the state and nation are in the grip of the lowest commodity prices of the decade — no matter what the crop — and in some cases, the lowest prices in memory.

"We don't want to cry wolf, but at these prices, the wolf is at the door," County Agent Howard Cormier told the overflow crowd.

Tuesday's meeting drew a standing-room-only crowd of more worried farmers as commodity prices plunge.


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some of whom came straight from the rice fields and would return to continue the harvest after the meeting. “If some of you can’t afford to stay in farming, we want you to approach it the right way.”

LSU farm management expert Gerald Giesler counseled farmers on how to negotiate with financial institutions, terminate land lease agreements and seek protection under bankruptcy laws. “The important thing is to prepare yourselves, not ignore the problems and hope they will go away, because that only makes things worse,” he said.

LSU Agriculture Center economists and others said Tuesday mill estimates of rice below $8 per barrel, a drop of more than half from last year’s $17 opening, is bleak news for farmers already in dire financial straits. “The future of farming may be in managed partnerships, as we are already seeing with big corporations like Monsanto buying up all the seed-producing companies, for instance,” economist Gene Johnson said.

Linda Zaunbrecher of Gueydan, who serves in various state and national rice associations, prompted audible grumbling from farmers when she said buyers and processors may soon dictate what to plant, when and how. “The way things are headed, there will be little autonomy left for individual farmers,” she said. “One problem is, the public at large doesn’t realize the gravity of the current situation. People are losing their family farms.”

Vermilion Parish Rice Growers’ Association president David LaCour, who farms about 1,000 acres of rice with family members south of here, said simple supply and demand “is killing us this year. Usually there is a bad year in some rice producing areas of the world, but everybody had big yields and the market is way down,” he said.

Hubert Faulk, who farms in the northern part of the parish, said it is hard to estimate how long many farmers will be able to hang on. “The market outlook for the next couple of years is not good,” he said.

“How long can a man keep losing money and stay in business?” Faulk said. “The price of equipment and everything else except the crop is way up, so it is awful hard trying to get your sons and daughters to follow you into farming these days. We’re headed toward losing our way of life.”

County Agent Andrew Granger said government price supports “have worked for many years, since the Great Depression. We have the most abundant and safest food supply in the world in this country and spend less of our paychecks on groceries than any other developed nation, but the 1996 Farm Bill may change all that.”

Federal soil and water conservationist Dale Broussard agreed. “The government has spent twice as much money trying to patch up that legislation than it would have spent leaving the old price supports in place,” he said. “This so-called ‘Freedom to Farm’ bill passed in 1996 has given us the freedom to go out of business.”

Broussard said the belief in some quarters “that the government subsidizes the farmer is false. The government subsidizes the consumer and the farmer is caught in the middle.”

Nick Simoneaux, manager of the G & H Seed Co. location in Kaplan, said he deals with farmers every day who are worried about making it through the next growing season. “People are scared,” he said. “The situation is more serious than a lot of people realize. We’ve heard estimates of 30 percent of our farmers giving up farming.”

LSU farm policy analyst Al Ortego said U.S. farm policies “are not well defined at all. We have to find a way to stabilize farm prices and help our farmers be competitive in the global marketplace.”