Greener acres
Farmers increasing crop sizes this year

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Good prices and promising weather are putting a bloom of optimism on Louisiana farming this spring.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture planting outlook shows Louisiana farmers intend to boost acreage in nearly every major crop in 1994.

Louisiana farmers’ planting intentions generally track planting intentions nationwide.

Cotton acreage in Louisiana will hit its highest level in 40 years if farmers follow through with plans the Agricultural Statistics Service found when it surveyed farmers in March.

Encouraged by several favorable factors, rice farmers are boosting their acreage by 17 percent, the survey found.

Soybean acreage will drop by 100,000 acres compared to 1993, the survey found. Two farm sources said that may be because farmers are shifting soybean land into other, more profitable crops, or they may have put marginal-type soybean land in a federal conservation program.

“I think there is a possibility there if people are careful in their marketing, and they take advantage of some prices that are available, ... we’re going to see a good year if we can just get good weather,” Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation president Ronnie Anderson said.

Clyde Arnold, left, and his helper, Robert Watts, prepare seeder to plant corn in West Baton Rouge Parish.

The outlook for a drop in soybean acreage did not surprise Anderson.

Farmers indicated they would plant 1.2 million acres of soybeans, or 8 percent fewer acres than in 1993.

Anderson said some soybean land has gone into the

See CROPS, Page 2E
Crops

CONTINUED FROM 1E

Conservation Reserve Program, which takes land out of production. In the rice area, some land that might have been planted in beans is going into rice this year, he said. The cotton acreage expansion would take some soybean land, too, he said.

“Years ago, we had a lot of people who produced only beans, but that has changed,” Anderson said. “You don’t have many people in full-time bean production.”

Cotton acreage could increase by 3 percent, to 920,000 acres in Louisiana this year, the statistics service reports.

“That would be a pretty healthy acreage in my thinking if we planted that much,” said Thomas Burch, cotton specialist for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

The projected acreage is especially high considering the mandatory acreage reduction is 11 percent this year, 3.4 percent higher than last year, he said.

“All other things being equal, that should translate to a smaller acreage than this,” Burch said. “But what has happened is the price of cotton has increased in recent months, and a planting of 920,000 would require a considerable acreage to be planted outside the farm program.”

Farmers who take advantage of government price supports have an assigned acreage based on their planting history in a crop. To control supply, the government can trim that base acreage.

However, if farmers choose to gamble on the market alone, or do not have a base acreage, they are generally free of acreage restrictions.

Last week, cotton was selling for about 73 cents a pound in Louisiana. The price in recent years has been 20 cents a pound or less.

“Use of cotton is up in both the United States and the world, and there was less leftover cotton to be carried over into the new year,” Burch said.

Favorable weather has let farmers get into fields and prepare them for planting, he said.

“Higher prices and more exports—especially getting into the traditionally closed Japanese market—and factors favoring more rice this year, said Paul Seilhan, rice program coordinator for the extension service.

Seilhan offered price comparisons between 1993 and early 1994 rice prices. In March 1993, rough, unmilled rice was about $5 a hundredweight (100 pound measure) at Crowley.

In March 1994, the price for No. 2 long grain 55/70 rice delivered to a rice mill was bringing $11.40 a hundredweight.

In futures markets, the price for the extension service.

“Planting conditions have been very good this year. Rice planted in mid-to late March is growing rather well. We haven’t had the extreme problems with seed and seed drift due to high winds,” Seilhan said.

“In mid-to late March, weather was rather warm and there was not so much problem with seed and seedling diseases,” he said.

Corn acreage could increase by 35 percent this year, according to the planting survey. The Agricultural Statistics Service found farmers expect to have 310,000 acres of corn in Louisiana, up 80,000 acres from last year.

The USDA did not impose an acreage reduction on corn this year. There was a 10 percent reduction in 1993. Prices are also higher.

Grain sorghum plantings could increase by 20,000 acres, to 150,000 acres. Sorghum is used in livestock feed.

And sweet potato growers said they intend to have 19,000 acres this year, up 2,000 from the 17,000 in 1993.

The USDA will not issue its outlook for sugarcane until June 30.

Anderson said there is potential for farmers to have a good year.

“They are going to have to be very careful of their marketing. They are going to have to take advantage of the prices that are available and be wise in their marketing,” he said.

Farmers will have to use “good advice and good judgment,” Anderson said.