Farmers play wait-and-see with rainfall

By PAUL REDINGER

The weekend rains put a smile on the face of nervous parish soybean farmers who were look- skyward for signs of moisture to ensure a good start for their cash crop — one which may harvest big rewards, if activity on the Chicago Commodity Market continues to push future prices even closer to the four-digit level.

A lack of adequate rainfall this spring has been a serious problem — and may yet worsen, if future rain fails to materialize when critical to growth in the coming weeks and months.

Soil Conservationist Jerry Hall, with the Evangeline Parish Soil and Water Conservation District, reports that survey cards recording rainfall levels from random rain gauges throughout the parish show Evangeline averaged only one inch during May. Last year, during the same month, the parish averaged seven inches of rainfall, Hall notes.

Charles LaHaye of Evangeline Farmers Co-Op reports some farmers have yet to pick up soybean seeds they ordered.

He noted that some area farmers were able to plant their soybeans after brief rains about two weeks ago. Others were forced to postpone planting until after this weekend’s rains.

The lack of moisture, he added, has also affected rice farmers. The young seedlings have not been damaged, but those rice wells have been pumping more frequently to catch up with the water needs.

Don McDaniel, manager of Ville Platte Rice Dryer, Inc., estimates that 95 percent of parish farmers will have planted their soybeans by the end of this week or the end of next week. County Agent J. Aubrey Mire concurred with that projection.

“Much of the impetus behind the farmers’ skyward glances is coming from the trading floor in Chicago, where investors have driven the future prices for soybean up over $9 for January delivery. “Beans are looking at $8.94 for October-November delivery,” remarks McDaniel. “All indications are that it (the price) will go to four digits.”

Many parish soybean farmers won't be able to take full advance of the speculator-propelled high prices.

McDaniel estimates that about 50 percent of the parish’s growers advance bought soybeans when prices were in the $6.50-$7 range. “They hadn’t seen prices that high in three years,” he explains, “and they locked into expenses.” He continued, according to reports those farmers booked up to 15 bushels per acre. “That looks safe now,” he says, because normal yields per acre in this area range between 20 and 22 bushels.

Agronomist Dr. Walter Morrison of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service notes chances of success for planting soybeans with adequate moisture remains high, even if planting is delayed until early June.

Morrison sees recent price increases on the trading floor may boost soybean acreage in Louisiana even higher than the the two million acres growers said they intended to plant. It could go so high as 2.2 million, depending on moisture and seed supplies.

That pressure to expand original planting plans, and, hopefully, harvest more has occurred in Evangeline Parish.

“With the market up,” Mire reports, “they’re plowing up every nook and cranny.”

While recent rains will, most likely, permit soybean farmers to complete planting, the lack of early spring rains has hurt another segment of the parish’s agricultural economy.

Pasture land for cattlemen has been stunted. “We’re looking a disaster right in the eye,” says Mire, if pasture land cannot recover.

That concern for cattlemen was substantiated by Jim Shipp, a cattlemen himself and manager of G&S Implement Co. “The