Farming’s ‘watchdog’ at DEQ
Liaison watches out for agriculture

By DICK WRIGHT
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As Louisiana agriculture is brought closer to regulation by environmental laws, it will be well positioned in the formulation and issuance of rules, thanks to a 1991 act of the Legislature.

The act calls for a review of any actions by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality affecting farming by the LSU Agricultural Center and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

The act also calls for the governor to appoint a liaison “between the department (DEQ) and the agriculture industry, including both production and processing and their various operations and industries.”

Farming’s watchdog inside the Department of Environmental Quality is Filmore Bordelon III, an Avoyelles Parish farmer and member of the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation.

Bordelon said last week the job of the liaison is full-time. He remains a farmer. He said he has hired other people to carry out farming for him, although he works with it after hours and on weekends.

Bordelon’s farming operation grows cotton, corn, soybeans, milo and wheat.

“Before the DEQ implements any rule or regulation affecting agriculture, I must first go over that with the LSU Ag Center and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry to see if there is any kind of economic impact they would have on agriculture, and if an alternative method could achieve the environmental goal DEQ is trying to achieve,” Bordelon said.

Bordelon’s office is in the DEQ building.

He said most of his work is with DEQ’s Office of Water Quality. That is where a program to deal with “non-point source” pollution — largely, rain runoff from fields, towns, logging, construction sites — is conducted. Non-point source pollution controls are especially important to farmers since they cover the sediment, fertilizer and pesticides that may be carried off fields into streams, where environmental guidelines may consider it pollution.

Bordelon is on the board of directors of the Avoyelles Parish Farm Bureau and is a member of the Avoyelles Parish Wildlife Federation. He is also chairman of the Soybean and Grain Research and Promotion Board.

The act that authorizes the governor to appoint an agriculture-environment liaison also directs how farming-related rules and regulations proposed by the DEQ are to be reviewed.

“The department (DEQ) shall inform the chancellor of the Agricultural Center and the commissioner of agriculture and forestry of proposed rules, regulations or permit fees and the reasons for such,” Act 860 says.

The chancellor of the Agricultural Center is to designate the personnel to review proposals and what kind of impact, including economic impact, they will have on agriculture. The LSU experts also are to consider alternative farming practices that will achieve an environmental goal and assess the probable effectiveness of proposed rules, regulations and fees.

The positions of the DEQ and the agriculture community will be sent to the governor through his liaison “for his participation in implementing or limiting the implementation of any such rule, regulation or practice change.”

The act blocks DEQ action on a rule, regulation or fee unless the Agricultural Center chancellor, the DEQ secretary and the commissioner of agriculture and forestry give their opinions that “the rule, regulation or permit fee is justified, practical and worthy of implementation.” Public hearings in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act must be held on DEQ’s proposals affecting agriculture.

Following requirements under the federal Clean Water Act and the Coastal Zone Management Act, the Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Natural Resources (which is in charge of coastal zone regulation) are working on ways to make farming and forestry environmentally cleaner.

Federal and state regulations govern pesticides and their use, and violation carries fines. But other activities of farming and forestry are largely unregulated. The DEQ, in its non-point source water pollution program, has proceeded under voluntary and cooperative action with various aspects of farming.

However, the 1990 amendments to the Coastal Zone Management Act may step up pressure on farming and forestry by imposing regulation on certain of their activities found to contribute to water pollution.

Committees consisting of farmers, DEQ personnel and LSU Agricultural Center specialists are at work now trying to write “best management practices” — ways of farming and forestry — that will diminish water pollution. The Louisiana Office of Forestry is conducting a series of workshops around the state to show how forestry practices, especially logging, can be carried out with a minimum of disturbance to the forest setting.