State farmers finding it tougher to keep growing

By SHERRY SAPP
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Elmo LeBeouf III has long dreamed of going into farming like the rest of his family. But he probably won't.

"My father keeps telling me that there's a heck of a lot better ways to make a living," said LeBeouf, who is the New Roads-based executive director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Bobby Ducote, an insurance adjuster for Consolidated Farm Service Agency, based in Jackson, Miss., agreed.

"I was a grain farmer for 21 years, but I had to get out of it when the prices started dropping so bad," Ducote said. "And I was lucky to get out when I did."

Ducote was not alone in abandoning his farm 10 years ago. In the decade since Ducote stopped farming, Louisiana has lost 7,000 farms - down to 27,000 farms statewide today.

Today, Louisiana farmers have 8.5 million acres under cultivation - 1.3 million fewer than 10 years ago.

In 1985, Louisiana had 34,000 farms with 9.8 million acres under cultivation.

"The number of farms is going down," said Charles Allen of the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation in Baton Rouge.

The decline in farming is a national trend that began in earnest 10 years ago.

Ducote and LeBeouf recently traveled the sugar cane region, where crop damage has been heavy enough to devastate farmers, but not enough to qualify for federal assistance.

But, Ducote and LeBeouf don't expect many to go out of business because the majority of farmers still in business now have become much more savvy in order to survive the business.

To make a profit, farms have had to grow from 200-acre plots to the 500- to 1,000-acre mammoth operations they are now.

"If I can make $250 an acre; then I will have to have 200 acres to make a living of around $30,000 (after expenses)," said Allen, who is farming a few acres of corn.