Freezing vital on this La. farm

Lecompte vegetable operation provides new element for state agriculture

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LECOMPTÉ — The red earth fields along U.S. 71 at this Rapides Parish town are usually bare in December, but on the farm of Jerry Hoyt and her sons, Hines and Allen, they are green with broccoli, curly mustard, turnip greens and spinach.

For the Hoyts, who have just opened a commercial vegetable freezing plant, the broccoli is the mainstay. That is where the demand is.

The Hoyts' Louisiana Agripack, Inc., from its first broccoli Oct. 13, Jerry Hoyt's birthday. Its impact is already felt in and around this rural Rapides town. Employment jumped by more than 159 jobs.

One day recently 10 to 12 people were in a field harvesting the heads of broccoli florets — the tight green clusters of edible flower buds — in an exercise that meshed hand labor and mechanization.

The workers, sharp knives in hand, moved down the rows behind a slowly moving conveyor, cutting off the broccoli heads and dropping them on the conveyor belt. The belt dropped the broccoli into a wagon. One tractor carried the conveyor attachment; a second, moving in tandem, pulled the wagon.

The freshly cut broccoli went directly to the freezing plant across U.S. 71 from the fields.

It is the freezing plant that adds the extra dimension to this vegetable growing operation. Louisiana has vegetable growing regions, some for canners but mostly for the fresh market.

Career farmers, the Hoyts plotted their entry into vegetable processing for more than a year and half.

Jerry Hoyt said her family specifically rejected the fresh produce business in favor of the more stable frozen vegetable operation.

The result is Louisiana Agripack. It is owned and operated by the Hoyts, though it has other investors. They estimate their investment amounts to about $2 million.

Discussing the plant and how it came about recently, Jerry Hoyt and Allen Hoyt — Hines was away on a buying trip — said they buy some vegetables from other farmers. Eventually, they intend to offer farmers contracts to grow for the freezing plant.

Standing at the end of the broccoli rows, with a large field of curly green mustard greens behind her, Hoyt said she and her sons intend to farm vegetables in rotation with the usual field crops.

"This has come behind corn and soybeans this year," she said.

"Some of what we did this year was experimental. We experimented with different vegetables and a little cauliflower an several varieties of broccoli to see how it would come along," Hoyt said.

While several kinds of greens can be processed, broccoli is the mainstay because that is where the demand and the profit are, Hoyt said.

The Hoyts live on the land they farm. Jerry Hoyt and her late husband bought the land, which lies in the Red River delta. In the past, their land grew sugar cane and cotton. Sugar cane was a good crop, she said, but the closing of the nearby Meecker sugar mill factory ended sugar cane this far north for several years. Sugar cane can once again be seen growing along U.S. 71. It is harvested south for grinding.

Commercial vegetables are a new undertaking.

"I think at first probably everyone thought it would be a tremendous amount of hand labor," Hoyt said.

But harvesting methods are advanced. While each broccoli head is cut off individually, conveying it by a moving belt into a wagon eliminates crates and lifting. At the freezing plant, the broccoli is moved from the wagon directly onto another conveyor that takes the fresh broccoli into the plant.

Once inside, the broccoli heads are trimmed, washed, blanched, packaged and frozen in a continual operation.

"The whole enterprise is very interesting," Hoyt said.

Mustard greens can be harvested without any hand labor in the field.

Broccoli is seeded directly into the row, rather than started in flats and transplanted. Hoyt said the farm used a 40-inch row this year.

Growing vegetables entails no government subsidies. But vegetable canners have had trouble getting a steady supply of produce from Louisiana farmers, he said.

A notable failure in large-scale vegetable growing was a northeast Louisiana project centered in Morehouse Parish. A number of farmers tried switching from traditional field crops to the fresh vegetable business. The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry sank about $40,000 into it.

Poor marketing — not having the buyers for the fresh, perishable produce — has been given as one reason the project did not succeed.

Boudreaux believes there is a place for vegetable growing in Louisiana as a means of diversification and as a way to stimulate rural economies by creating jobs. "It will provide employment for many people in all phases of it," he said.

Jerry Hoyt said the people who work for Louisiana Agripack came from the area. The company does not bring in foreign labor, she said.

Both Jerry Hoyt and Allen Hoyt emphasize the importance of having the market for the product when they were putting together their enterprise, Allen Hoyt said, the LSU experts told them:

"You can grow it, but you can't sell it!"

"We can sell. We've got the sales." Allen Hoyt said.

The Hoyts said they did not want to be in the fresh market, Jerry Hoyt said, they never intended to break into anyone else's market. But, she said, a farmer can grow for the fresh market and still sell to Louisiana Agripack, as well.

Allen Hoyt said farmers who grow for Louisiana Agripack can know before plating the price they will get for their produce. That does not mean a farmer necessarily will know his income, because that will depend on how much he can harvest, but he will know a price, Hoyt said.

The Hoyts have used the services of the LSU and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Financing so far is private, but they are working on getting Home Administration guaranteed loan.

Louisiana Agripack is running only one shift now, but it already has run two shifts. The Hoyts say that depends on the amount of product coming in.

"Everyone had to be trained," said Jerry Hoyt.

"We have had to go through a learning curve," Allen Hoyt said. "Production has come up a lot over the first day we ran." "Things have gone well," bill added.