Harvest in Louisiana

1993 crop isn't huge but no disaster either

By DICK WRIGHT

Louisiana farmers are well into this year's harvest.

The cotton gin are starting up. The elevators are filling with soybeans, corn and grain sorghum. Rice is nearly harvested, sugarcane awaits the cutter.

And on Irv Daniel's Feliciana Farms in West Feliciana Parish, truckloads of sweet potatoes roll out of the field - bound for the kiln to be cured or enroute directly to the produce sections of food stores.

Sweet potatoes are not one of Louisiana's big acreage or government-supported crops. But they can be an important part of a locality's agriculture. Louisiana had about 14,000 acres of sweet potatoes scattered through several parishes this year. Irv Daniel's farm grew 250 to 300 of those acres.

Daniel hires up to 65 people to dig, sort, wash and store sweet potatoes. Growing sweet potatoes used to be a West Feliciana farming mainstay. Not any more.

"Back in the '40s and '50s there were 5,000 acres in West Feliciana and maybe a dozen packing houses," Daniel said. Princeville Canning Co. in St. Francisville, bought potatoes from West Feliciana and Wilkinson County, Mississippi.

"At the time it was running it was the biggest sweet potato canning company in the United States," he said. The cannery employed 850 people, Daniel said. But its need for so much hand labor also was the reason a new owner closed the plant as obsolete, he said. That almost wiped out sweet potato farming in West Feliciana.

"My family has been in continuous sweet potato production for about 100 years. We started selling them about 70 years ago," Daniel said. Sweet potatoes once were a staple for farm workers, he said.
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Daniel said he sells his potatoes — big plump Beauregards, the variety of choice for many Louisiana farmers — "green." That is, fresh from the field if he gets orders, or he dries them in a kiln for several weeks.

Curing preserves them and brings out the sugar that makes a baked potato sweet. "They'll bring a premium price," Daniel said.

Feliciana Farms also borrowed a marketing idea from the Vidalia, Ga., sweet onion business and began selling "gourmet" boxes of Louisiana yams. "We have a pretty good trade in it," Daniel said.

Daniel said he has raised other crops, but he hasn't found one as feasible as sweet potatoes. "This is the only thing year in and year out that will pay the bills for us," he said.

Farming in several parts of Louisiana, particularly the northeast part, suffered from dry weather at the wrong time, Dave Ruppenicker, Farm Bureau associate commodity director, said. While 1993 was not a record-breaking year, it was not a disaster either, he said.

"Don't think you have any disaster crops out there. Maybe some farmers will have a disaster," Ruppenicker said. On the other hand, he said, "You are not going to have the crop farmers need to make ends meet."

One northeast Farm Bureau member told him it was the driest summer he had seen in 10 years, Ruppenicker said.

"We are going to make a decent crop in cotton," Ruppenicker said. "It is not going to be anything to brag about due to the dry weather."

"I would have to think for soybeans we are going to have reduced yields because of dry weather," he said. Soybeans are rarely irrigated, he said.

Late season rains could help sugarcane grow more before it is harvested, Ruppenicker said. Some cane, especially away from the coastal areas which got showers, is shorter than usual due to dry weather, he said.

Soybean prices went up in the summer as the impact of Midwest farm region floods peaked, indicating to the market that supplies might be short.

Soybeans for delivery to Louisiana elevators hit a high price of $7.57 a bushel in late July, Kyle McCann, a Farm Bureau assistant commodity director, said. Soybean prices dropped to $6.28 on the futures market and $6.50 a bushel in cash sales in Louisiana one day last week when McCann checked. Soybean prices before the Midwest floods had been below $6 a bushel, he said.

Corn prices also rose because of the Midwest flood, trading one day last week for $2.38 a bushel in futures trading and $2.75 for sale in Louisiana, McCann said. Prices had been higher during the peak of the flood, he said. Before the flood, prices were around $2.30 a bushel, he said.

Corn and soybeans sold and delivered in Louisiana bring a higher price because most of them are going to be exported and don't have to be hauled long distances to shipping points, McCann said.

"We are at the end of the river, and all these transportation charges are not counted against you," he said.

Prices for rice are low, McCann said. The local price is $5.50 per 100 pounds.

Prices for high-quality rice, which sells for $4.58 per 100 pounds, when McCann checked. Soybeans for delivery to Louisiana were sold for $7.57 a bushel.

The government's rate is saving rice right now, McCann said.

Here are the government's projected acres for harvest and yields for major Louisiana crops:

- Cotton — 875,000 acres, 1,350,000 bales
- Rice — 560,000 acres, 26,880,000 cwt. (100 pound measure)
- Corn — 250,000 acres, 27.5 million bushels
- Grain sorghum (milo) — 130,000 acres, 14,500,000 bushels
- Soybeans — 1.2 million acres, 30 million bushels
- Sugarcane — 375,000 acres, 9 million tons