Angola inmates enjoy traditional harvest barbecue

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ANGOLA — About 1,200 Louisiana State Penitentiary inmates got a jump on the Thanksgiving holidays Wednesday, enjoying barbecue and live music instead of laboring in the soggy fields under the watchful eyes of gun-toting guards.

The inmates who assembled at the Angola rodeo arena Wednesday do the bulk of the farm work on the 18,000-acre prison-plantation. They plant, tend, harvest, grade and pack a variety of vegetables, as well provide the labor to grow the prison’s other crops, including cotton. Much of their work involves cutting grass with hoes or other hand tools.

Warden John Whiteley said working on a farm line is the least desirable job at the prison, but one of the most important, given Angola’s agricultural mission.

The annual barbecue is an Angola tradition that’s been spaced up for the past two years by grouping the farm lines at the rodeo arena for the meal and music by prison groups Mega Sound and Big River Band.

When everyone finished eating, the inmates formed up in lines to go back to their dormitories — to take the remainder of the day off and “rest up” for the four-day Thanksgiving weekend.

CONTINUED FROM 1B

There is just our way of showing appreciation for the work they’ve done," Whiteley said, adding "the harvest is more or less done."

Col. Billy Travis said the cookout began during former Warden Ross Maggio’s tenure, but, until Whiteley arrived, workers carried the meals to wherever the farm lines happened to be working that day.

Veteran security officers were at first leery of assembling 1,200 prisoners in one location for lunch, but no problems developed, Travis said.

Prison Enterprises employees and seven inmate cooks used two dump truck loads of firewood to barbecue 1,500 pounds of chicken and 1,000 pounds of pork for Wednesday’s feed.

"They started at 4 o’clock yesterday afternoon, and they’ve been there all night," Angola farm Manager Jimmy Smith said as trusties and employees delivered ice chests of meat and pans of baked beans, potato salad, biscuits and pineapple cake.

Whiteley said Angola’s kitchen, maintenance and other work crews aren’t left out, but “they’re small enough for their bosses to throw them a party around Christmas.”

Smith said Prison Enterprises also hosts parties later in the year for its trusty farm workers — range crews, tractor drivers, dairy workers and others who work with minimal supervision.

"I feel this really helps morale," Smith said.

Not all prisoners agree, of course.

"This ain’t nothing but a show," said inmate Elliott Gale. Another called it "a prank."

Gale compared the farm lines to "old time slavery" because the majority of inmates never get an opportunity to develop useful skills in prison.

Veteran inmate John Wimberly, however, said the field work is not that hard and "we get treated fair."

"The hard part is having a lot of time on your shoulders," Wimberly said, but field work gives inmates a chance to avoid encounters with homosexual activity or prison "cliques."

"You come out to the field, and you get away from all that," he said. "It’s a blessing, and I use that word respectfully."