Harold Willett inspects crop of kenaf

Kenaf industry locates near Jeanerette

By: Karma Champagne

South Louisiana sugarcane farmers will soon have an opportunity to utilize their idle farm land and at the same time supplement their income with a new crop. Kenaf, an annual plant that is primarily grown for its high quality fiber, has proven to adapt well to the south Louisiana area.

Louisiana's first commercial operating company dedicated to the new Kenaf agro industry will locate close to the Jeanerette area. Natural Fibers of Louisiana Inc. with its main function to grow, process and market products made from the fibrous plant kenaf, was organized the first week of September, according to Harold Willett, president of the company and organizer.

Willett said it is the intention of the company to locate its processing plant and headquarters along Highway 90 close to Jeanerette. Temporarily headquarters will be located at 900 Canal Street in Jeanerette.

OTHER ORGANIZERS of the company include Charles Lanie of White Star Farms, David Gaugnard of Crops Genetics International, Stevens Willett of Cameco Industries and Linda Delano of Computers For All.

Although the kenaf plant has been grown in the United States before, it is new to this area. The plant is a native to Sudan of East Africa and has been in use there for many years as a prime source of fiber, Willett said. Today, large quantities of the kenaf fiber are imported into the United States as a raw material or a semi-finished product and is used in carpet padding, burlap and fiber mats.

Two-row cane harvester cutting matured kenaf

K-Bast (a long jute like fiber) and K-Core, a low density woody short fiber.

One of the prime uses of the highly absorbent K-Core will be bedding materials for animals to replace wood chips. Race tracks, breeding stables, veterinarians and zoos in the vicinity offer a large market for the new bedding material, Willett said.

The Kenaf crop is relatively inexpensive plant crop to grow, proving to have a special value to the local sugarcane growers.
and land owners since it will use the idle land that was harvested in the fall which waits for cane planting in September.

According to Willett, the amount of usable land laying idle each year is approximately 20 percent of the total cane area. Another big advantage to the cane farmer, Willett said, is that the farmer utilizes his present cane harvesting equipment to do all the harvesting of Kenaf. The crop is cut with a standard 2 Row Harvester, loaded with a cane loader and unloaded into a stack on the farm for later retrieval by the processor and used within the next 12 months.

"THE ADDITIONAL use of the equipment tends to cut costs in the cane operation and allows for extra income," he said.

Test acreage has already been planted on White Star Farms in Iberia Parish for three consecutive years. Testing shows that the kenaf can be planted on a standard cane row, harvested, then followed by cane planting in the fall with minimum till. Within its 120 to 140 day growing period, the plant reaches a height of 10 to 12 feet and will produce approximately 6 tons of dry material per acre.

Willett said the present plan is to contact local farmers during the next couple of months to plant 1,000 acres in 1991 and increase the acreage each year until it reaches 3,000 acres in 1994.

H. Willet and Associates pioneered work with Kenaf when they were chosen as the contractors to develop a new mechanical harvesting system for the crop. This project was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and administered by Kenaf International of McAllen, Texas. The whole system was developed, the machinery was built and put into operation in a span of two and a half years. Most of the equipment leans heavily on technology developed by Willett for the sugar industry.

"THIS WOULD not have come about without the association with Kenaf International and the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research Services," Willett said.

"The project would never become a reality without the very valuable help and encouragement given to Natural Fibers of Louisiana Organizers by the Louisiana Department of Economic Development, William Wilton and Bob Odoms, Louisiana Department of Agricultural. The staff members responded quickly and their efforts to assist industry for Louisiana were amazing. They are doing their job well," he added.

Willet came to the Acadiana area when Cameco Industries of Thibodaux purchased J & L—HONIRON of Jeanerette. He was one of the original founders of Cameco and remains on their Board of Directors.