Forrest Shackleford spends his days talking to fellow farmers who have seen their fertile land turned into flooded lakes.

As the days tick off before it will be too late to plant, farmers across northeastern Louisiana are facing possible financial disaster that will do more than just trickle down to the economies of their agriculture-based parishes.

Shackleford said farmers already have been reduced to the point of just hoping to throw a crop together that will enable them to pay their bills and break even.

"It’s like a country man once said: ‘I don’t want any cheese. I just want out of the trap,'” he said.

At least 275,000 acres of Morehouse Parish farmland is under water from the worst flooding that old-timers have seen since high water inundated the area more than 50 years ago. The high water was triggered by heavy rains in April that backed up the Ouachita River and area bayous. In less than 24 hours in late April, the area received more than 11 inches of rain.

"This is the worst shape our country has been in since 1927," Shackleford said.

Shackleford said his family farming operation, which is centered around cotton and peanuts, will survive without any problems. But the smaller operator has his back to the wall, he said.

"The people who are well-financed can recover in a year or two," Shackleford said. "But if a farmer is borderline, he’s not going to be able to do it again."

Buddy Mock was one of a group of idle cotton farmers who gathered in the office of Shackleford’s cotton gin. He said waiting for the water to recede and enough dry weather to put the fields back in shape was frustrating.

“You can’t do a damn thing until the water drains off and the fields have a chance to dry,” he said.

The agricultural extension service at Louisiana State University had recommended that farmers wait no later than May 15 to plant cotton. Although farmers said they planned to go past that deadline, a later planting will translate into lower yields, more problems with insects and the chance of an early frost catching the crop — a total disaster.

Asked if he would make it through the year, Mock said: “Come back next year and check with me again.”

“We will have to plant a crop,” Shackleford said. “But it’s not going to be much of one.”
Shackleford's son, John, said that even though the crop has not been planted, farmers already have an extensive investment out. The Shacklefords already have spent about $100 an acre for land preparation, fertilizer and chemicals. In addition, some farmers are required to pay their land rent before starting work, another major expense that may not be recouped, he said.

But John Shackleford said the cotton farmers still have hope. "These rice people, they're screwed," he said. "Their crops already had been planted and it's been underwater for two weeks. It can stand three or four days, but two weeks, forget it."

Rice farmer James Kiper said crop insurance probably will save him from a disastrous year. However, not all rice farmers carry such coverage. John Shackleford said cotton farmers almost never carry insurance because of the high cost for that crop. Besides, crop insurance only pays if the seed has been planted.

Kiper pointed down the highway toward a store as he explained how the farming slowdown already is hurting the area's overall economy. "That little store isn't getting my money because I'm not burning gasoline. My help's not spending any money because I'm not paying them any," he said.

Duke Shackleford said his cotton gin employs about 30 people at the height of the processing season. Now, there are questions about whether there will be much cotton at all to gin, he said. "We're going to have a bad problem," he said. "What do we do with the people who work for us?"

Jack Churchwell, who manages a heavy farm equipment dealership in nearby Mer Rouge, said he already has laid off eight of his 31 employees and more cutbacks are expected. The large garage that is usually busy with maintenance work on $140,000 cotton pickers, $120,000 combines and $60,000 tractors had only a whisper of activity.

"That is as empty as that shop's been in five years," Churchwell said. New equipment sales during 1991 have been nonexistent and the company's business is off 35 percent to 40 percent for the same time last year, he said. "This will carry into 1992 because the best they know they can do is break even," Churchwell said. "That doesn't leave any room for new equipment purchases."

Duke Shackleford said that since the flooding was restricted to a narrow area, farmers were not counting on disaster relief. "This disaster is probably not widespread enough to warrant anything on the federal level from farmers," he said.

Despite the problems, John Shackleford said he's not beyond counting his blessings. He knows he will survive — something his fellow farmers may not accomplish. "It's times like these that I realize how lucky I am. "Mother Nature will humble you."

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