Increasing Exports

LIBERTY RICE MILL in Vermilion Parish posted revenues in 1991 of $20.84 million, placing the agricultural concern at No. 20 in the 1991 Acadia Top 100. Liberty Rice Mill processes rice grown mostly in the Kaplan area and sells the milled product largely through export and to domestic breweries.

"This was a good year for us," says Liberty Chief Executive Brian Kaplan.

"We made some good inroads in Puerto Rico, where we are fairly entrenched, and into other markets."

The medium grain rice that Liberty specializes in is not a big seller in the U.S. market, which largely revolves around long-grain varieties. Besides, domestic production is more than satisfactory to meet demand for rice on American dinner tables.

Liberty sells rice in the United States to Anheuser-Busch, but its larger markets are Puerto Rico, and, increasingly, other Latin American countries where rice is a staple.

"Currently we’re working to expand our markets in Mexico and Latin America," Kaplan says, "and there is a promise there for us. Changes in Cuba could make some difference for us, too—we sold a lot of rice to Cuba before communism and could return to that market. It could be a big market for us.”

What about Japan? "I wish (Sen.) John Breaux and I could answer that for you," Kaplan chuckles. He turns more serious to say that he concurs with the industry view that rattling all that Detroit iron on President George Bush's recent trip to Japan probably did more harm than good to the delicate efforts that have been made to increase U.S. rice exports to Japan.

There may in fact be more reason to hope for increased exports to Cuba than to Japan, and Kaplan’s observation that Liberty once had a market in Cuba demonstrates one of his company’s strengths—Liberty has been doing business solidly for over half a century, and relationships that have lain dormant for decades can still be fertile. "We’ve done business with farmers in Kaplan for 60 years," Kaplan says. "And we’ve brought their product to market successfully. Those relationships are strong on both sides, and we’re confident of their continuing in a productive way.”

Brian Kaplan:
"We sold a lot of rice to Cuba before communism and could return to that market.”