Louisiana '87 farm crop
had good yields, income

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Louisiana farming enjoyed one of its best years in 1987, as good prices, good weather and good government programs came into alignment.

Figures for 1987 for most crops spoke good news after several years of depressed prices, drought or flood, and big surpluses. Poor weather in other countries and a cheaper dollar, which made American goods more attractive to foreign buyers, were also factors.

Rice and corn acreage was down. But cotton production soared. Sugarcane prices held up and acreage increased. Soybeans, after a long spell of low prices, were selling for more than $6 a bushel, and surpluses dropped.

Overall, gross farm income in Louisiana increased by about 12.5 percent in 1987, according to preliminary estimates.

All major government-supported crops are doing all right, according to Clyde St. Clergy, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service economist. Cotton farmers planted 600,000 acres, up from 570,000 acres in 1986, and they harvested a record 792 pounds per acre.

Record yield and good prices added up to a gross farm value of the cotton of about $386 million, compared to $201 million in 1986, St. Clergy said.

Sugarcane acreage grew by 15,000 acres in 1987, and farm income from sugarcane jumped from $171.2 million in 1986 to an estimated $187 million in 1987.

Rice acreage fell by 6,000 acres, but yields of 4,560 pounds per acre equaled the 1986 record yield, according to the Agricultural Statistics Service. Gross farm income from rice was about $130.7 million in 1987; it was $114.9 million in 1986.

Soybean acreage dropped to about 1.6 million acres in 1987 from 1.75 million acres in 1986, but income soared, thanks to unexpectedly high prices. Gross farm income from the soybeans crop jumped from $133.3 million in 1986 to an estimated $233 million in 1987.

Both corn acreage and farm income from corn were sharply down in 1987. Total production was just over 22 million bushels, or just over half the 1986 crop. Gross farm value of the crop in 1986 was $76.2 million. It was about $45 million last year.

Grain sorghum acreage also dropped. From 596,000 acres in 1986 to 172,000 last year, and farm income from sorghum dropped from $35.2 million to an estimated $19 million in 1987. Yield per acre improved, however, from 68 bushels in 1986 to 72 bushels in 1987, and the price averaged 9 cents over the 1986 level, according to the reporting service.

St. Clergy said both cotton and rice benefitted from the government's marketing loan program, which puts a floor under the price of the two commodities, but still lets them sell at the world price if it is lower than the loan rate. The loan rate for rice last year, for instance, was $6.84 a hundredweight. The world price fell below that, but the government made up the difference to farmers. Cotton prices have been above the government loan rate.

Besides the marketing loan program, U.S. cotton and rice are benefiting from reasonably good prices and government programs that are good for major Louisiana crops worked to the state's benefit in 1987, he said.

"That doesn't happen all that often," he said.

The number of farmers asking for financial analysis and advice from Extension Service economists has dropped sharply, St. Clergy said.

To make money today a farmer needs a number of assets, St. Clergy said.

The farmer needs to grow at least one government-supported crop and he needs good land, he said.

"In today's world he had better be a darned good manager," St. Clergy said.