Louisiana farmland value rising

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana farmland values are rising for the first time since they peaked at an average of $1,454 an acre in 1981, according to new Agricultural Statistics Service figures.

The average price of an acre of Louisiana farmland in February was $722, according to figures just reported. That is $14 more, or 2 percent higher, than last year's average for Louisiana.

Both the Louisiana and the national average price of farmland had been falling — in some years plunging — since the inflationary peak years of the early '80s. But the national average was up 6 percent in the latest figures. Farmland values rose in all regions of the country except the two-state Southern Plains region composed of Texas and Oklahoma. In that region the average value dropped 2 percent from the previous year. The loss was in Texas. Oklahoma farmland showed a gain in value.

In other regions along the Mississippi River and east and west of the river, farmland prices gained over the past year.

Mark Haik, Baton Rouge Realtor who deals in large acreages, said last week that farmland is moving again. The land speculators seem to be out of the market now, he added. Most farmland sales have been to farmers trying to expand.

For the early part of 1989, Haik said, "there has been more farmland

CONTINUED FROM 1E

hormones, is under way with LSU's Ron Malone, in civil engineering, and Tulane University's Milton Fingerman, whom Huner describes as one of the foremost crustacean endocrinologists.

Huner also maintains contact with researchers in Sweden and Finland, and he travels extensively, paying a considerable amount of the expense himself.

Besides his special interest in soft-shell crawfish, Huner said the center is interested in harvesting methods. Farmers have to reduce their harvesting costs, so he emphasizes that area.

Crawfish farming has become a major rural enterprise in South Louisiana, and with it have come some problems.

Among them, for instance, is a bait shortage, Huner said. One company finds it profitable to haul in menhaden and herring from the East Coast to be used as bait in Louisiana, he said.

Overall, Huner said, the crawfish industry has problems that need a coordinated attack, and the solution to them may be the pooling of resources.

Another problem is the declining price of crawfish, Huner said.

Prices have been dropping on the average of 5 to 10 cents a pound for the last four to five years, Huner said.

"Everybody knows the price is going to go down 20 cents or more after Easter," he said.

It is not a drop driven by supply and demand, he added.

At first the Crawfish Center, established in 1976, focused on crawfish only, but it is now incorporating some other aquaculture work, like fish farming, Huner said. In fact, Huner would like to stock one of his ponds with tilapia, a warm-water food fish, this summer if he can overcome bans on exotic fish species in Louisiana. There is also some work in catfish at the USL Experimental Farm.

"We don't have a specific laboratory," Huner said. "We use facilities available through the College of Agriculture as well as the College of Sciences . . . We do eventually want to put in some wet labs at the farm."

Huner said USL will work with crawfish and other finfish at the farm. The university also has another aquaculture specialist in Mark Konikoff, in the biology department.

Diversifying in both agriculture and aquaculture is important, Huner said.

In the future, Huner said, he wants the Crawfish Center to seek funding for crawfish harvesting research and soft-shell crawfish production. He also wants to work with finfish production along with crawfish production.

Crawfish remains his specialty, but he said:

"I am more of a generalist than a specialist in one field."