Louisiana loses farmers

In 2002, state had 10 percent fewer farms than it did in 1997

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CARENCRO — Louisiana lost 10 percent of its farms between 1997 and 2002, a U.S. Department of Agriculture report said. The news is no shock to Carencro grain farmer and cattle rancher Sidney Bowles, 65.

"I think about quitting every day," Bowles said Thursday. "I stay with it because I like it."

By 2002, Louisiana had 27,844 farms, down about 10 percent from 30,425 in 1997, according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture. As a whole, the nation lost 4 percent of its farms.

The census also showed that two-thirds of the Louisiana farms are generating less than $10,000 in annual sales.

Louisiana lost about 6 percent of its farmland during that five-year period, falling from 8.3 million acres to 7.8 million acres. County Executive Director James Trahan said he wasn't surprised by the figures in the report.

"In the last few years," Trahan said, "grain farmers in particular have had a tough time with falling prices and rising costs."

Bowles said he has been farming since 1981 and grows about 350 acres of wheat. That crop will be followed by corn and soybeans. Bowles also runs about 100 head of cattle. The rising cost of running a farm is one factor that is pushing a lot of farmers out of the market, he said.

The census report also showed the average age of Louisiana's farmers was 53.5 years old in 1997 to 55.1 years old in 2002. The average age of all U.S. farmers, which has been rising since 1974, is now 55.

About 27,000 of Louisiana's 38,000 farmers were over 45 in 2002. About 2,700 were 75 or older.

"In most industries, you don't see people over 75 years old working," Agriculture and Forestry Commissioner Bob Odom said Thursday. "They put in their 30 years and retire. Farmers just can't do that."

Bowles said he has seen fellow Acadiana farmers turn to other work.

"It's a tough thing to watch, to see your friends quit and go by the wayside," Bowles said. "But if they can't do it, they just can't do it."

Bowles said he has a son who is in college now.

"I tell him to stay in school and finish college," Bowles said. "There have been more bad days than good, and I think about quitting every day. I won't, though, but I realize I won't be here forever."

By the numbers:
A snapshot look at farming in Lafayette Parish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2002</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>6,520 acres</td>
<td>6,770 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybeans</td>
<td>7,786 acres</td>
<td>6,720 acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sugarcane</td>
<td>15,870 acres</td>
<td>16,694 acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>117 acres</td>
<td>856 acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>15 acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total value</td>
<td>$30.913M</td>
<td>$26.671M</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: LSU AgCenter