ABBEVILLE CROP-DUSTERS
Modern Farming Takes To The Air

Acadiana News
Editorials

ABBEVILLE - Early summer is the busiest time of year for those daring men who deftly sweep around utility lines and seem to almost skim across the ground as they dip and dive over a farmer's field. Between the time when the fields are plowed and the crop is harvested, a kind of aerial farming has evolved, with the crop dusters seeding, fertilizing, and spraying for insects and weeds. The increase in the use of crop dusters is due to the pinch created by a shortage of farm labor and the speed with which the planes can perform operations which previously took days for farmers on the ground.

"A farmer can plant 40 acres in a day and with our airplane we can plant 500 acres in a day," Chris Crasta, who owns a crop dusting service in Abbeville, explained. The pilots, Crasta himself a pilot, fly over the fields and direct the planes which can fly about two hours on a 64-gallon tank of gas. With a 600 horsepower engine up front, they closely resemble early World War II fighter planes, and many were old war trainers. When the business started after the war, surplus trainer planes were sold for a few hundred dollars and could be modified for use as crop dusters. Crasta, who has been in the business for 30 years, said now the planes cost about $82,000 each.

The planes cover an area of smaller farms in Vermilion Parish in a radius of about 17 miles around Abbeville. The planes make use of abandoned Air Force landing strips within the area to load the plane with the farmer's seed or fertilizer, keeping their work within two to three miles of the strip. A winch truck transfers the seed from the farmers' truck and loads it into the hopper, in front of the cockpit in the plane. After using solid seed or fertilizer, the spreader beneath the plane can be removed and a wet plate installed with a pump for the plane to spray. Seeds and most fertilizers are solid and applied with a spreader, while insecticides and other chemicals are liquid, applied with a sprayer. The crop dusters sweep down to about 30 feet above the field to apply seeds and fertilizers and come even lower within a scant three feet for liquid spraying.

The season begins in March with the seeding of rice fields. A schedule book in the main office at the airport keeps track of appointments for the day, which begins "as soon as we can see" in the busy season. The spraying of insecticides and weed killers is done first, before the wind picks up because the drift of the spray could affect areas around the field.

At about 7 a.m., with the spraying completed, seeding or fertilizing begins. The rice is planted in swaths, strips down the length of the field. A flagman stands at the end of the field to direct the plane, and after each pass, the flagman moves over to the next swath.

Two to three weeks after the rice is planted, the crop dusters return to fertilize, which is done again with an aerial nitrogen fertilizer three weeks later, Crasta explained. While the rice is growing, it is sprayed with herbicides to kill the grass and weeds and again with insecticides if insects become a problem.

"April, May, and June are the busy months for rice," Crasta said, with pilots coming in and out of the office to get assignments. July is relatively light, but soybean spraying begins at the end of July and extends through August and September.

"After September, we do mostly pasture work. Although many cattlemen are selling their cows now," Crasta said. "We plant rye grass and do some fertilizing.

The unpredictable South Louisiana weather affects the crop-dusting business. "Our worst time is fog because it delays the beginning of our day for three or four hours," Crasta said. The only time the planes fly in the rain is when planting rice, because about 90 percent of the rice is pre-germinated. and must be planted soon after it arrives.

"We can plant in the rain if we have to, although it visibility is poor or it's an electrical storm, we don't fly," Crasta said.

During the few months of the slow season, Crasta's crew goes to work on the planes, checking the engines, replacing old parts, and getting the planes ready for their annual inspection. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) also periodically checks their log books.

Some of the pilots stick around, while others travel with the work, staying here for the rice crop, moving on to Mississippi and Arkansas for the cotton and soybean crops and some going as far south as Peru for the rest of the year.

The continual growth of subdivisions, with corresponding power lines running "not just along the roads but through some of the fields," are increasing in the area, and moving closer to farm land.

A crop duster's day ends when all the jobs for the day are completed, and the plane comes into the airport. If fertilizing and seeding has been done and spraying will be done the next day, the plane is converted to a sprayer, with a wet plate making a tank out of the hopper and the pump installed for the next day's work.

By MARIA GALL
Advertiser Area Reporter

Making a Run - The crop dusters swoop down for a pass over a flooded rice field as two flagmen guide his course. The planes fertilize and seed about 30 feet off the ground and spray for insects or weeds at a close three feet off the ground.

LOADING - Ricky Guidry, one of the ground crew, loads fertilizer into the hopper of a crop duster.

EXPLAINS - The farmer explains to pilot Hollis Gooch how he wants his field sprayed. The farmers usually act as flagmen to direct the planes.

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Photos By Peter Piazza

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BIRDS EYE VIEW — The pilot gets a good look at the area after flying over to fertilize a rice field. The planes fly about 110 mph when seeding. This time of year is the busiest season for crop dusters.