More farmers hiring expert advisers

By DICK WRIGHT
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In the field the air is humid, the temperature is rising, mud sticks like glue to shoes. Otherwise, it is a nice spring day, and Dwayne Coulon is right at home.

Coulon strides rows of head-high rustling green corn. He scans the green stalks for signs of worms and bugs that eat the profit out a farmer’s field.

Coulon is a crop consultant, a paid adviser to farmers. He tells farmers when it’s time to spray for pests, and how much to spray and where to spray.

Coulon performs several other services for farmers but he says the mainstay of his work — of most crop consultants’ work — is insect monitoring.

A crop consultant is the “eyes and ears” of farmers who don’t have the time or sometimes the knowledge of insects and pesticides to monitor fields, say Coulon and neighboring consultant Harold Lambert.

A crop consultant doing his job calculates the number of stink bugs, chinch bugs, cutworms, borers or other pests in a given place. He reckons by experience and formulas whether it is worthwhile for the farmer to spray.

On a morning recently, Coulon checked out a corn field across the road from Bayou Grosse Tete. He was looking for the tell-tale signs of corn-eating insects and caterpillars. The pests leave their marks — tiny holes in the green blades, or droppings.

In one field he gathers a sheaf of corn blades, or leaves. He will send these to a lab for analysis to see whether the corn is getting the nutrients it needs.

North of the territory Coulon works, consultant Harold Lambert takes a visitor to meet a customer. George LaCour farms 3,000 acres in upper Pointe Coupee Parish — corn, cotton, soybeans, rice.

“It takes just about that many acres to make ends meet,” LaCour says. “When I started farming we farmed just soybeans.” Farmed 1,000 acres of soybeans and worked only part of the year, too, he says.

In his office a television screen lets LaCour watch approaching rain clouds on weather radar. Switching channels, he follows grain prices in Chicago trading.

He talks about the high price of tractors, how hard it is to stay in farming — and what he believes too much of the public thinks he does.

“The biggest thing I find in the perception of the public here is

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the United States is that we're dumping all these chemicals out there," LaCour said.

LaCour uses pesticides, but he said he calls Lambert before he sprays. "You don't want to do any more than you have to.

"If you had the time you could do some of the things I do," Lambert says.

"I have a hard enough time just keeping up with new products on the market," LaCour says. "You come begging this guy" — indicating Lambert — "please tell me what I can use.

I pay Harold a fortune, in my opinion, I'll be honest, but he saves me a fortune," LaCour says.

Lambert said there are 110 to 120 licensed crop consultants in Louisiana today.

The first crop consulting he knows of came in the 1940s when a north Louisiana cotton farmer hired Ray Young and another man at Louisiana Tech, Lambert says.

The farmer hired the men to inspect his field for insects feeding on the plants and recommend solutions.

Coulon said he believes a high percentage of cotton and sugarcane growers use crop consultants. Those are high-value crops subject to insect damage, he said.

In the 1960s, insects developed resistance to classes of pesticides then in use. Farmers needed more recommendations on what to use, Lambert said.

Today, Lambert said, there are fewer farms and they have gotten larger. "That just accentuates the need for farming operations to bring in outside help," he said.

Coulon and Lambert charge by the acre for a year's service. They said consulting fees run $2.50 to $4 for corn, and up to $10 an acre for cotton. Cotton has more insect pests, than most crops and requires more monitoring, the consultants said.

A crop consultant since 1981, Lambert is president-elect of the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants this year.

"When I was working on my bachelor's in agronomy at LSU, a guest lecturer was in the classroom one day," Lambert said. "His research was in on soybean insects. He was in crop consulting, and he gave us a brief insight into what he was doing as a consultant."

Lambert was interested. He decided to get a master's degree in entomology, the study of insects. He did research under the late Dale Newsom, a Boyd professor at LSU.

"Under him, I got the benefit of his practical approach to the real world of insect problems out here in the field," Lambert said.

"This will be my 14th crop season," he said.

Lambert follows a regular schedule checking fields of his customers. "They're counting on me to be there and check on things," he said.

He does not give financial advice. He does not sell a product. "My clients have an appreciation for someone in the field looking after their best interests," he said.

In Louisiana, Lambert and Coulon said, a person can't just hang out a sign announcing he or she is in the crop consulting business. Consultants have to be certified by the state.

The work requires crop consultants to be familiar with pesticides and pesticide laws.

Coulon says removal of several pesticides from the market has farmers worried. "That is a main concern right now," he said.

Another worry, Coulon said, is that manufacturers may decide the cost of getting government approval of a chemical isn't worth the return if it is only for "minor" crops. Sugarcane, for example, is not even a minor crop in 46 states, but it's a major crop in Louisiana, he said.

Pesticides are expensive and that is one reason, contrary to public opinion, Coulon said, farmers are not quick to "dump" them on fields. Farmers and sprayers also are aware of the public's fear, he said.

"Most aerial applicators are as they once did. That means they don't have much time to spend overseeing one crop, Coulon said.

Farmers have several sources of information — LSU, county agents, seed companies, chemical companies — besides consultants, he said.

"I take a more physical role in that I monitor a crop on a weekly basis and make sure everything is going as it should be going," Coulon said.

Customers, he said, "expect me to check behind those applications to see that the application was made right."

Coulon grew up in St. James Parish, the son of a county agent. He has a Ph.D. in entomology from LSU. He started consulting in 1978.

Coulon has an office in his house, or at least that's where he keeps books, computer and fax machine.

But when he is not checking a field, he is usually in his pickup. "This is essentially my office," Coulon said.

One day the government may elevate the crop consultant to a necessity by requiring farmers to get "prescriptions" to use certain pesticides, Coulon and Lambert said.

Before a farmer could buy and use a pesticide, he would have to show a prescription from people such as Coulon and Lambert.

Both consultants said they hope that doesn't happen.

"I feel like the people who use me now use me because they see a value in the service," Coulon said. Prescriptions wouldn't be voluntary, he said. They would force farmers to pay for his services.

Coulon said.