Pointe Coupee farmers voice concerns

By STEVE CULPEPPER
Advocate suburban writer

BATCHELOR — Farmers in Pointe Coupee Parish are facing the hardest economic times they've seen, and they say part of their problem has been getting government to listen.

But at a Sunday afternoon meeting here of the Family Farm Survival Alliance they got part of what they need: They got about a half-dozen elected officials to hear them.


He's tried to get out of farming, Ewing said, but "you can't until they foreclose. I've been trying to sell my farm for over a year."

"We all looked real good on paper until a couple of years ago. Now that paper's as worthless as Confederate money was at the waning days of the Civil War," he said.

Despite the fact that the Farm Bill goes before Congress for a vote Monday — minus some provisions which farmers here say they need — Ewing believes there's still hope, if the government listens to farmers.

Ewing and the rest didn't waste time Sunday blaming government for their troubles. They say they just want to get their problems out into the open where those who can help will hear and, they hope, help as well.

Over the past two years, the Federal Land Bank has foreclosed on about 100,000 acres of Louisiana farmland, Ewing said, quoting institution figures.

The Federal Land Bank's plan to sell 74,000 repossessed acres at $650 per acre won't help farmers who also are trying to sell out, Ewing said.

"You're not going to buy $1,200- to $1,400-an-acre land when this $650-an-acre land is for sale. That's what the buyer looks at," he said. With lower-priced land going on the market, farm prices will go down. And banks that are asked to lend money to farmers will devalue the land, collateral or equity in a farm when they compare it to the $650-an-acre land sold by the Land Bank, he said.

The Land Bank might foreclose on another 100,000 to 150,000 acres when notes come due in January and February 1986, Ewing said the bank has announced. "But they're backing off that a little now."

While farmers are paying two and three times as much as they did 10 years ago for farm equipment, as much as double for seed and chemicals, the commodities they raise bring in the same price as they did in 1973, he said.

"Some people who could've made it with lower commodity prices got hurt by the hurricane," he said. Hurricane Juan, the last of three hurricanes to hit the state this year, struck the final blow to many local farmers, he said.

Odom said before Hurricane Juan struck only about 5 to 6 percent of Louisiana farmers would get out of the business after this year. But the destructive winds ripped through crops that farmers needed to pay their loans, and he said now he expects about one-fifth of the state's farmers won't farm next year.

Odom said he has been working with the Federal Land Bank on its scheduled land sale to raise the price of repossessed land to non-farming concerns. "And they're going to have a little more lenient foreclosure policies than what they said at first," he said.

The commissioner said the Farm Bill is "no big deal, but it will tell us what we have." He said the bill will also "make lending institutions settle down a little."

But the Land Bank, the Farmers Home Administration and the Production Credit Association, who lend to farmers, also have been scared by the economic conditions, Odom said.

"The FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.) is putting pressure on them. The depression has put them in bad shape. We're going to lose a lot of farmers."

The lending institutions will decide whether the state "will lose 20 or 30 or 40 percent of the farmers," Odom said. "I don't believe 20 percent of those this year will farm next year," he said.

"We're going to lose a lot of farmers survive, but we're going to lose a lot of good ones."

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 Farmers CONTINUED FROM 1B

Kimball said the meeting was "primarily a time to find out from the Congressional delegation why it is that the current administration appears to be turning its back on farmers in general, turning a deaf ear to the problems of our farmers."

These people aren't just interested in getting their farm loans funded next year, they're not just interested in getting disaster loans (for the effects of Hurricane Juan). They need profit to stay in business," Kimbball said.

As part of their effort to get their problems out to the public, every member of the Family Farm Survival Alliance wore a green ribbon on their name tags.

"People have worn yellow for the hostages, blue for the police," he said.

"We're asking people to tie green ribbons. Green is a sign of nature and hope. It's a sign of support," he said.

Donald Lafleur, a farmer who drove in from Grant Parish, said, "The whole thing in a nutshell is that farmers can't do anything with no cash flow. You can't get enough for your products."

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