Prison potato farm yields double benefits

By JAMES MINTON

ANGOLA - A potato-growing project at Louisiana State Penitentiary here is reaping benefits for both the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank and inmate scholars.

Since January, inmate farm workers have tended about 20 acres of Angola’s rich farmland to grow Irish and sweet potatoes for the food bank. The food bank buys the potatoes for a penny per pound above cost.

Next year, the penitentiary will plow the profits into college classes for selected inmates.

The potato project is the brainchild of food bank board member Dr. Julius Mullins Sr., a retired Baton Rouge physician.

After joining the food bank's board, Mullins learned that "when you feed the poor, you have to beg from those who have it better. So I thought it would be a little more classy if you didn’t have to beg as much."

Although the food bank has received surplus Angola-grown produce in the past when it was available, Mullins thought of buying a pre-arranged amount of potatoes to give prison officials money to pay an LSU instructor to teach a college course at Angola.

It was an easy idea to sell. "It's such a logical arrangement I don't know why somebody didn't think of it before," he said.

“We’re excited about it,” food bank Director Carl Stages said.

"It’s conceivable that inmates are growing food that may be feeding their families," added Mike Hardy, agriculture director for the corrections department’s Prison Enterprises division.

Hardy is president of a national organization for prison agriculture officials, and said he knows of no other program in the country like Angola’s potato patch.

"We feel very committed to the community," he said. "We’ll do anything we can to help."

Hardy said Prison Enterprises personnel and inmate field hands planted 10 acres of Irish potatoes and about 10 acres of sweet potatoes. Heavy spring rains reduced the Irish potato yield from an anticipated 100,000 pounds to about 17,000, pounds, but the sweet potatoes were blessed with better weather.

Prospects for a bumper crop are excellent, Hardy said.

Angola Warden John Whitley said details of the college offering aren’t final, but "we’ll probably start with a basic English course."

Prison officials haven’t set a limit on the number of inmates eligible for the classes. Whitley added. "We’ll see how many are interested and qualified."

Angola farm supervisor Ed Ryan, watching a group of inmates gather sweet potatoes last week, said LSU researchers developed the Beauregard variety planted at Angola. Although the potatoes sometimes grow quite large, they don’t develop the stringy texture often found in oversized specimens of other varieties.

Hardy said Prison Enterprises pegged the cost at 4 cents per pound, and the food bank pays 5 cents per pound.

The potato sales are an addition to Prison Enterprises’ regular assistance to the food bank.

Hardy noted. After the agency takes care of the needs of Angola and seven other prisons in South Louisiana, it sometimes has a surplus.

Some of the surplus is sold on the open market, but a large portion is donated to the food bank, which distributes it to hungry people through its 103 member agencies.

Since June, for instance, Prison Enterprises has donated $1,000 pounds of okra, eggplants, peas and other vegetables to the food bank. Hardy said.

Mullins hopes the potato project can be increased in scope — he’s thinking about next year’s corn crop — and continued over time.

He thinks of Angola as an "agricultural Aladdin’s lamp." Rubbed the right way, it can produce untold benefits.