Potatoes may become extra state crop

A trial crop of potatoes on a Caddo Parish plantation has come in so successfully farm experts are talking about potatoes as an extra crop for Louisiana.

Mission Plantation manager Marcus Oswalt planted 142 acres of potatoes back in February. He sold the harvest to Frito-Lay Inc. for potato chips.

According to the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, Oswalt did his homework before he sank a seed potato. He planted only after he had a contract to sell the potatoes to Frito Lay.

“We've got a suppressed market for cotton and other grain crops,” Oswalt said in an Extension Service press release about the trial crop. “We are just trying to diversify to be able to exist.”

Potatoes are not replacing cotton on the 4,500-acre plantation, the release emphasized. Mission Plantation is near Ida, by the Red River at the Arkansas state line in Caddo Parish. The soil there is a sandy loam.

“Cotton is still going to be the primary crop,” Gil Barker, county agent, said. Mission has 1,600 acres of cotton this year, plus cattle and alfalfa, he said.

Oswalt said rain was the biggest problem. “We had one chance to plant potatoes and that was the twenty-second of February. We got them planted, and it was raining before we finished. Then we have about nine inches of rain within the next two weeks after we planted,” Oswalt said.

Oswalt leased an electronically controlled potato planter and bought a potato harvester and potato grading equipment, the Extension Service said.

The plantation grew the Atlantic variety of potato and a Frito Lay variety, Barker said. Potatoes go from the field directly to a potato chip plant as they are harvested, he said.

“All indications are that they (Frito Lay officials) were very impressed with the quality of the potatoes,” Barker said.

Color is a primary point, he said. “The whiter the chip the better. They don't want dark chips.”

Yield was lower than in other potato-growing areas, but that was to be expected because the crop was the grower’s first, Barker said.

A good yield is about 200 sacks — 100 pounds per sack — an acre, he said. The Mission crop made from 125 to 150 sacks an acre, he said.

Barker said Oswalt came to him and the LSU Agricultural Center specialists for advice well before he planted the potatoes. The Extension Service said Agricultural Center experts said the soil and climate of northwestern Louisiana are the best suited in the state for growing potatoes.

Other farmers are showing interest in growing potatoes, Barker said. The county agent said he does not look at potatoes as an “alternative” crop but rather as a supplemental crop. He said the potatoes come in right at a time when cotton farmers need the cash.