Rain legacy affecting crops

By DICK WRIGHT
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The Louisiana farm outlook at this point in the season is definitely mixed, and the uncertainty of the year has not passed. But despite spring rains that shut down agriculture in Louisiana for weeks, there are some bright spots. It is not a disaster year all around. But will good weather hold up for the harvest?

Southwest Louisiana rice farmers are into a good harvest, but rains were hard on rice growers in northeast Louisiana.

Corn growers planted with high hopes. "Planting went perfect," said Wade Self, Pointe Coupee Parish farmer. But in April, the rains set in and farmers saw fields go under water. Saturation stunted corn, which then matured too early and yielded small ears and grains that didn't fill out.

For a while, as the spring rains persisted right into the prime of the planting season, a cotton crop appeared in doubt for some sections of the state. But now, though planting was late, at least some cotton farmers are watching good growth and the setting of bolls. But the late planting means a late picking, and that raises the worry of running into fall rain.

So, the farm scene is mixed and outcomes not decided. A drive through the rich farming country of Pointe Coupee and Avoyelles parishes showed the mixture — corn was yielding medium to poor results, some cotton was doing well but much of it was still small for this time of the year, and soybeans ranged from small but healthy to weedy and puny.
Corn grower Bryan Carroll and son Todd, 13, stand on load of corn harvested from farm at the Coon community, Pointe Coupee Parish.
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A lot of bean land apparently was not planted at all. Acadia Parish, for instance, normally has 140,000 acres of soybeans but has only 3,500 this year, and Vermilion, which usually has 80,000 acres, has only 3,000 to 4,000, farm agents there said.

Sugarcane, still rebounding from a 1989 record freeze, may be a bigger crop than ever.

Though it is still too early to assess the outcome of the year, a segment of Louisiana farmers may be in for a mini-rerun of the farm bankruptcies of the 1980s. Asked about that possibility, Mack Perdue, the Farmers Home Administration's chief of farmer programs in Louisiana, said any year there is not a good crop, a certain level of farmers is endangered by inability to pay debts.

"There is a percentage of the total that ends up in trouble," Perdue said. "They have to rely on bankruptcy or writedown (of debts) to stay in farming, and (for) some even that won't help."

"Farmers who have been able to have a little margin stacked back — equity in equipment and real estate — they can weather a tough year," Perdue said. "But when their assets have been eroded, they can be in financial straits, he said.

Here are some crop reports gathered in the last few days:

Self said he expects fewer than 100 bushels of corn to an acre. The average for the parish is around 140 bushels, and some farmers have harvested close to 200 bushels in good years.

"Planting went perfect, but the rains started around the 10th of April," Self said. "He said water saturated the roots, which made a weak plant. The results showed up at harvest — corn matured earlier that it should have, ears were small and the grains were not well filled out."

Bryan Carroll, also of upper Pointe Coupee, said, "I planted cotton three times. I planted soybeans three times." He said wheat rotted in the field.

Like Self, he said the weather was perfect for planting corn in March. He said he usually makes 170 to 180 bushels of corn per acre, but this year the yield may be closer to 120 bushels.

"Barring a late frost or hurricane, we might break even on cotton," he said. "And I know I'm ready for this year to end. I'm ready for a new beginning," said Carroll, who farms with his brother, Sidney.

Filmore Bordelon brought cotton back to the Cottonport area of Avoyelles Parish last year.

The reason was simple. "The bottom line," Bordelon said. Cotton is a government program crop with an assured price, and he needed the payments to break even. "You can't make any money with grains now," he said.

Cotton by his 112-year-old family house was waist high and setting bolls.

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Closeup view of grain sorghum (milk) captures the Louisiana farm crop this year — some is good, some is a little thin.

That happened to be the field he could plant the first day he could get into the fields in May after a long rainy spell. The rest of his cotton land was too wet and was planted in June. "My intentions were to have 550 acres, but because of the weather and the late planting, I put in 300 acres," Bordelon said.

"Last year I started harvesting cotton on Labor Day," Bordelon said. He said it will probably be October when picking starts this year and that puts the cotton in danger of bad weather. "I guess a hurricane is our biggest fear."

County agent Carlos Smith said Avoyelles would have had 18,000 to 20,000 acres of cotton this year, but bad