State’s farmers urged to diversify to survive

Farmers who wish to stay afloat and maybe even prosper in the uncertain farming economy are being urged to diversify.

Chancellor Rouse Caffey of the LSU Agricultural Center remembers an agriculture student a few years ago who planned to be a rice farmer.

“He told me his fields would never be idle,” Caffey said. “He was going to plant rice. When he harvested his crop, he would lease his fields to duck hunters. When hunting season was over, he would convert them to crawfish ponds. Now, that boy was going to make it.”

As Louisiana’s oil and gas reserves are depleted, agriculture, forestry and aquaculture are going to become increasingly important as an economic base for the state, according to state and university officials.

It won’t be the traditional agriculture of the past with farmers putting all their eggs into one crop basket, they say. Farmers will have to diversify, take advantage of the latest research findings and market their crops aggressively in order to survive.

“Cajun food is in now,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom. “We must capitalize on that and really take off with our crawfish farming. And what goes with crawfish? Rice.”

If Louisiana can expand its commercial crawfish operation, open up new processing plants, set grading standards and market the mudbug, then the potential is virtually unlimited, Odom said. The Louisiana Crawfish Market Development Authority is doing just that.

The state must do the same thing with catfish, the commissioner said. Years ago, Mississippi took the lead in commercial catfish operations, so Louisiana will have to hustle to capture some of the market there, he said.

Research is showing that other marine life can be grown in commercial pond operations, Caffey said. LSU is investigating the possibilities for soft-shelled crawfish, Malaysian shrimp and redfish.

Ethanol plants opening up in the state in the next couple of years will require huge amounts of Louisiana-grown corn, sorghum, sugar cane and possibly wheat, the chancellor said.

Another possibility Louisiana farmers could look into is commercial vegetable operations.

California, Florida and Texas are encountering various problems in their operations, including urbanization, transportation and inadequate water supplies. Without these handicaps, Louisiana might take advantage of its ideal climate and soil conditions and capture some of their lost markets, Caffey said.

“We’re not looking to replace our present commodities, but rather to supplement them,” he said. “If we diversify and double-crop, we might use these alternatives to tide us over.”

“If we can take advantage of these ideas, we might move from a negative to a positive cash flow and turn this thing around,” Odom said.

While the state must pursue and market new crops, it also must continue to emphasize agricultural research, according to Doyle Chambers, recently retired vice chancellor for research at the LSU Agricultural Center.

Research strives to find methods to make farming produce more, be more efficient and take fewer resources to do a better job of producing.

Research is what gave Louisiana farmers the options they have today, he said.

Chambers said the greatest disappointment of his career is that “farmers who have used our technology and have become the most efficient in the world have not shared in the rewards that should accrue to them.”

“We must make it possible for the farmer to reap some of the dividends of his efficiency,” he said. “Leadership must be given to save the farmer — if not for his sake, then for our own selfish interest as consumers.”