A growing concern

Jean Heard, front center, asks about Creole tomatoes at the Vicknair Farms booth on a recent Saturday morning at the Red Stick Farmers' Market. For decades, small farms have been disappearing, but the market has helped a new, small wave of farmers sell their produce directly to the public.

State's small farmers say system ignores them

By TOM GUARISCO
 Advocate staff writer

Chris and Jenny Glasser often feel all alone working their 15-acre vegetable farm in Maringouin.

"I feel your big farmers get all your incentives, all your relief," Chris Glasser said. "If you're a small farmer, you pretty much exist on your own." Matthew Byrd said he feels the same way.

For 14 years, he has grown mustard greens in Erwinville and sold them on the corner of Washington and Thomas Delpit streets, with no help from any government agency when a freeze killed his crop.

"Your large farmer gets a write-off — they write their loss off and the federal government pays for it," Byrd said. "If I have a bad year, I've got to live with that. Sometimes you don't even have money to buy seeds, man."

Byrd and the Glasses are part of Louisiana's shrinking small-farm economy.

Just this past week, state Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom warned that a months-long drought may put a third of the state's small farmers out of business.

Small farms on the slide

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<th>Louisiana</th>
<th>Nationwide</th>
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<td>As the number of farms has dwindled ...</td>
<td>the average farm has grown larger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>160,000</td>
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In 1992, the state had 25,000 farms. Only 20 percent, or 5,000, had gross receipts of $10,000 or more.

Sources: Louisiana Agriculture Department, USDA, Farm Aid

Advocate graphic by Malanda Saxton
If we don't get some federal help, we'll lose 15 to 20 percent of our farms next year," said one. Only 5,000 still make a living raising livestock, the last large-scale figures show.

In 1960, 200,000 farms were operating in the state; the Department of Agriculture reported 184,000 last year, down from a high of 218,000 in the 1960s.

Large farms have gobbed up much farmland, and city jobs have lured many of the next generation of farmers away with better pay and easier hours.

Meanwhile the American consumer demands cheap, reliable year-round produce, which big agri-business is good at turning out.

But a federal study issued this year calls for a new wave of cooperation and help for small farmers. The study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and released in January, showed U.S. agriculture has become big business, and revealed it:

- Four farms control 60 percent of the beef.
- The largest 6 percent of the nation's farms sell 39 percent of the profits.
- Since 1970, 300,000 small farms have gone belly up.

Titled "A Time to Act," the study calls for the federal government to assist small farms, cut red tape and generally jump-start rural economies. The study classified small farms as those with annual gross sales of $250,000 or less.

Louisiana farm income was $1.6 billion in 1992, the latest year for which figures are available.

"We envision a competitive advantage for small farms rooted through a framework of supportive, yet responsible, government and private initiatives, the application of appropriate research and extension, and the stimulation of new marketing opportunities," the study's authors wrote.

The study proposes a major shift in the way government has viewed the small farmer. Both federal and state agriculture departments are geared more toward assisting major commercial farming operations, with smaller, moderately priced, programs for small farmers.

Glenn said he helped a state legislator helping him once when nearby farm operations were threatening his fields. The lawmaker made a call on his behalf while Glenn was in the room.

"He was on the phone and he said, 'We've got to help this man,' he's in a sweat," "Glenn said. "That's what a lot of people think, but I don't know why because you can make good money."

The USDA study recommended a host of policy changes at the federal level, including:

- Making farmers who have bad debts forgiven in the past eligible again for USDA loans or credit help.
- Improve the administrative infrastructure in USDA just for small farms.
- Develop and promote fair, competitive markets for small farms to compete.
- Emphasize sustainable, or organic, systems of farming.
- Institute some of the federal budget to help small farms.
- Reach out to small farms with resources and help.

Part of the problem facing small farmers is a lack of either small farms.

Rural families, explains Roger Glenn, have grown accustomed to a lifestyle that offers little or no modern conveniences. To pay for that lifestyle, they need to keep their certain minimum income.

"Farmers (of farms) they just can't get that done," Glenn said. The sales depend on the crop grown, but in general, farmers who produce larger producers enjoy lower expenses with a diversity of crops than their counterparts.

Byrd said he learned that! When he drove off a 100-year-old farm a few miles away.

Louisiana, other forces work against the small farm.

Robert oil and chemical industries have forced away the farm workforce, Hinson said.

As long as young people see they can get a job off the farm and earn a living and they don't have to put in the long hours on the farm, they'll continue to leave the farm, Hinson said.

The options for farms to stay in business is to expand or generate more income, or to find full or part-time jobs off the farm to supplement their pay.

They either expand the farm to up the income, or they go off-farm, Hinson said.

In Baton Rouge, a group has the past two years creating a market for produce grown here.

The Baton Rouge Economic Agricultural Development Council is creating the weekly Red Stick Farmers' Market downtown in Baton Rouge. Farmers sell their produce directly to consumers, giving them a chance to make a living off their land.

Small farmers don't have the luxury of selling to big supermarkets, and say that their health is a major obstacle to the market.

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Company says it feels small-scale farming is a coming-of-age in Louisiana.

For example, a group of county extension agents put on a seminar for beginning vegetable farmers in Lafayette late last year, charging $80 a person.

"Fifty-one people attended," Company said.

"The interest is definitely on the rise," he said.

Last year, marked by spring floods and a summer drought, the Red Stick Farmers' Market has seen a half dozen new farmers just in the Baton Rouge area, Company said.

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