Growers hope for 'sweet' season

The Associated Press

After two years of devastating weather, Northeastern Louisiana sweet potato growers are cautiously optimistic.

"It looks like we could have one of the best crops we've had in years," Morehouse Parish grower Kelsey McKoin, who planted about 300 acres this year, said during the annual LSU AgCenter Sweet Potato Research Station Field Day.

But growers are wary about tempting fate after two hurricanes wrecked the crop in 2008 and record fall flooding rotted much of the 2009 crop.

"We think we're looking good, but we've got to avoid any more disasters," said Franklin Parish producer Ken Thornhill, who grows about 800 acres of sweet potatoes. "The growers' operations are about as stressed as they can be. We need to get the harvest in the barn."

Growers are beginning a harvest that will likely last into October.

"The crop looks good, but it's been a little slow to size because of the extreme hot temperatures," said LSU AgCenter sweet potato specialist and research station coordinator Tara Smith.

More than 100 growers and industry representatives, attended Tuesday's field day, some from Mississippi, North Carolina, California, the Dominican Republic and Australia.

The LSU AgCenter Research Station scientists and staff developed variety icons like the Beauregard and Evangeline during the station's 60-year history and provide annual seed stock for all of Louisiana's 100 producers.

Louisiana's research station is the only one in the country devoted entirely to sweet potatoes.

Economic Development Secretary Stephen Moret said the it played a big part in attracting ConAgra Foods' new Lamb Weston sweet potato processing plant in Delhi that will employ 275 workers and begin production next month.

Smith acted as a liaison between farmers and ConAgra, showing the company that sweet potatoes can be stored for up to a year, required for year-round production at the plant.

"We're all extremely excited about the project," Smith has said. "They told us that our research station was definitely one of the things that attracted the company. They felt like they we were a key resource in place if issues arise.

"Louisiana has the growers, the land and the research and extension in place that gave them the confidence to put the plant here."

McKoin said he thinks the plant could change the sweet potato industry in Louisiana.

He hopes it will eventually provide the financial incentive farmers need to dedicate acres to the plant.

The disastrous harvest has led to fewer sweet potato acres in Louisiana. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has forecast 15,000 acres this year, but Smith believes it will more likely be 13,000 acres.

"We've lost a lot of acres and growers in the last decade," Thornhill said. "The new plant could really make a difference."

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