



April 19, 2008

Growers: Strawberry season peaking

BATON ROUGE, La. -- Strawberry season is reaching its peak in Louisiana, and farmers and agriculture officials say the berries are sweet, production costs are high and the season is average.

"It's fair," said Anthony Liuzza, who's operation has about 100 acres between himself, his son and other growers in Independence and Amite. "The quality's very good. The berries are very sweet. But I guess overall with the weather conditions that we had, it's going to be an average season."

The berries are sweet because it's been sunny and dry lately and there's not a lot of water in them, agreed Eric Morrow, who describes the nine acres of strawberries on his Ponchatoula farm as a boutique operation.

"No two seasons are the same," Morrow said, "but hopefully it'll end the same (as last year). I'm right about where I need to be."

Brian Breaux, associate commodity director for the Louisiana Farm Bureau, said Louisiana's 85 strawberry farmers average 2,200 10-pound flats per acre and have 440 acres in production. Strawberries have a gross farm value of \$13 million per year.

Setting aside crops such as sugar cane, wheat, cotton and rice and looking only at fruits and vegetables, strawberries are among the more significant crops. Sweet potatoes are bigger, at \$58 million a year.

"It's a very high-value crop," Breaux said.

The season starts in early November and ends by Memorial Day, though shorter seasons in years with a hot, rainy May wrap up by Mother's Day.

When the season is over, Morrow said he will grow a cover crop of cow peas, which will be cut in mid-July to fall into the soil, decompose and fertilize the fields. In September, he'll lay the plastic in preparation for the late September planting.

For now, though, strawberry farmers and the laborers they employ are busy picking from the plants that supply them with berries throughout the seven-month season.

"We baby sit 'em," he explained. "We work seven days a week. Berries don't know it's Sunday. They don't know it's Easter. They don't know it's Christmas."

Morrow said growers, primarily clustered in Livingston and Tangipahoa parishes, are picking as fast as they can. "I haven't had a day off in two months," he said.

Only a generation ago, Morrow said, the season used to be much shorter. Advancements in growing techniques have lengthened it considerably.

"That is one of the key things that's kept us in business here," he said.

Liuzza said competitors in California are making the season longer on the front end, and Louisiana growers are forced to expand to compete.

Breaux said one of the limiting factors in farming strawberries is that they can't be harvested mechanically, which makes labor costs significant. He said the farms tend to rely on foreign workers using the federal H-2B visa program.

"Like all seasonal work, it's tough to find people who will do it," he said.

Many of the workers are from Mexico or Latin America, working the season, staying in the facilities and taking money back home. They work for \$8.41 an hour and get housing and utilities provided.

Breaux credited the visa program with keeping production up. Before it was available, labor shortages that left berries to rot in the fields would prompt farmers to plant less the following season.

"I'm real proud of Louisiana agriculture as a whole because there are a lot of other states that rely on undocumented labor," he said.

But while labor may be a major cost on an ongoing basis, the increase in other costs has grabbed a lot of attention, particularly fuel.

"What's killing these guys is the input costs are so expensive," Breaux said. "It's hurting their ability to make a profit." Breaux pointed out that it hasn't been that long since off-road diesel fuel was less than \$1 a gallon. It's now near \$4 a gallon.

"That goes a long way toward whether you're doing this for a profit or a loss," he said. And high oil prices don't just mean higher fuel costs, they increase the cost of plastic, chemicals, fertilizer and freight.

"Everything's up," Liuzza said. "Everything's higher."

For whatever reason, Breaux and Morrow say, California strawberries are often cheaper on grocery store shelves, and it's up to Louisiana consumers to support this state's growers if they want to sustain them.

California has the competitive advantages of economies of scale and the prevalence of illegal workers, though it also has higher land, irrigation and transportation costs.

Morrow said Louisiana strawberries have the competitive advantage of being fresher. His goal is to have them from the field to the stands in a day. If a berry is coming in from the West Coast, it could be 4 or 5 days old, he said.

Copyright 2008 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.