

Rice Growers Hear Mostly Good News

CROWLEY, LA.

The Obama administration could restore full trade with Cuba, the president of the USA Rice Federation said at the annual joint meeting of the Louisiana Rice Council and the Louisiana Rice Growers Association Jan. 29.

"The stars are finally aligned in favor of Cuba," said Betsy Ward.

She said efforts are under way to change payment requirements for Cuban rice purchases.

Free trade agreements are also pending for Colombia, Panama and Korea, she said, and those could work in favor of U.S. rice producers.

Jim Guinn, USA Rice vice president for trade, said Cuba has the potential to purchase 600,000 metric tons of rice. The largest sale of rice to Cuba in recent years under restrictive trade terms totaled 175,000 tons in 2004, Guinn recalled.

But Guinn said Cuba has yet to recover after a series of devastating hurricanes last year, and that has limited the island nation's spending ability.

Guinn also said the Jazzman rice variety developed by the LSU AgCenter's Rice Research Station will provide competition for imported Thai Jasmine rice which makes up 65 percent

of the rice imported into the United States.

"This new variety is an important development," Guinn said.

Dr. Daryll Ray, director of the Agriculture Policy Analysis Center at the University of Tennessee, said overproduction should be expected from farmers worldwide in the next few years. Brazil has tremendous capacity to increase farm acreage by as much as 300 million acres, he said, and Ukraine could return to its earlier production levels.

"Expecting trade to deliver U.S. agriculture to the promised land of unending prosperity with no government intervention is asking too much," Ray said.

Also at the meeting, Dr. Mike Strain, commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, said pending state budget cuts could cripple the LSU AgCenter.

"We must make sure we find the money for the AgCenter," Strain said. "Research and extension allow us to continue farming."

Strain also said the federal stimulus bill has a provision for \$54 million in community development block grants. Most of that would be for low-interest loans for farm production, he said. "The whole idea is to get our economy going again." Δ



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