

U.S. Rice Mills Urged To Offer Incentives For Quality Grain

BATON ROUGE, LA.

Until rice mills start to offer incentives for quality grain, farmers will continue to choose varieties based on yield, LSU AgCenter rice breeder Steve Linscombe told his colleagues from rice-growing regions across the United States.

"I don't think most of our mills realize how big of an issue this is, especially with our Central American export customers," Linscombe said at the 2013 Rice Breeders Conference held Wednesday, Jan. 30, on the LSU campus. "This is the only country in the world that doesn't pay a premium for quality rice."

But a few American mills are paying a premium for the higher-quality varieties such as the LSU AgCenter's variety Cheniere, which typically has very low levels of grain chalk and overall excellent appearance and quality, he said.

In his travels around the globe and the United States, Linscombe said, he examines rice being sold in stores and has found that long-grain American rice has fallen in quality.

Samples of popular long-grain rice were sent to nine mills for evaluation, said Anna McClung, Arkansas rice breeder for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The study confirmed that many currently available varieties have the quality that mills desire. However, these are not the highest-yielding varieties and are typically not grown on a large acreage.

A device is needed to provide consistent grain appearance evaluations, said University of Missouri rice breeder Don Beighley. But Linscombe said a visual inspection remains better than nothing.

Rice from Thailand and Uruguay consistently scored high in the evaluation, but several U.S. varieties did have comparable quality characteristics, McClung said. And earlier-planted rice grown in the United States had better quality. Environmental conditions also seem to have an effect on quality, including the amount of chalk in rice grains, she said.

Mills have also complained about inconsistent cooking quality, McClung said.

The USA Rice Federation has formed a task force to study the quality issue and devise ways to address it. Linscombe is on that panel.

Rice breeders from the rice-growing states of Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri and Mississippi also worked out their plans for the upcoming growing season. They pool efforts to grow each other's rice lines under development as possible new varieties in a consortium of universities called the Uniform Regional Rice Nursery. And they compare the results after harvest.

Breeders from each state gave an overview of the past growing season. Most states were not expecting their acreages to increase.

Mississippi State University rice breeder Tim Walker said the acreage there was the lowest since 1977. "There's not a lot of excitement about rice in Mississippi right now."

The USDA has projected this year's acreage at 100,000 to 110,000 acres, Walker said, but seed dealers are expecting only 70,000-80,000 acres.

Planting early in Louisiana resulted in higher yields as well as higher grain quality, Linscombe said. Some rice acreage in north Louisiana may be lost to soybeans and corn in 2013. △

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