

## The Louisiana Strawberry: Endangered Species?

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The Louisiana strawberry industry is declining. Farmers face problems on several fronts. Costs to protect the crop from diseases, insects, and weather are high. The state's temperate and humid winter-weather climate provides the production opportunity and also provides excellent growing conditions for diseases. Appropriate and effective crop protection is expensive. Insects and other pests must be managed. On each farm, two costly and somewhat redundant irrigation systems are usually in place: drip irrigation for delivery of water and nutrients, and overhead irrigation for cold-weather protection. Plastic row covers also are used for protection against cold, and these covers are expensive to purchase and the process of installing and removing them is labor intensive. Labor issues are also important. Domestic labor hired by the hour or on a seasonal basis is not available in an amount adequate to complete the required tasks, nor is this labor source trained in horticultural practices. Seasonal workers provide the labor and expertise but they search for other employment if they are not employed on a regular basis. Louisiana farmers usually diversify their crop production to mitigate risk and to manage these labor issues.

The market window, or competition from other growing areas, is a crucial factor for Louisiana growers. The dominant producers are Califor-

nia (with a season beginning in early April) and Florida (with a winter season somewhat earlier than Louisiana's). A cool-weather-delayed Florida crop or an early California competes directly with Louisiana's season. Growers in both those states have longer production seasons, so fixed costs are spread over more units of output.

Competing effectively during the market window between Florida and California, then, is critical for the Louisiana industry. Knowledge of the consumer within a market area and effective promotion and merchandising are critical factors. Research in these two areas will be the basis for recommendations regarding the industry's promotional effort:

- 1) Consumer perceptions of the alternatives will be evaluated. Louisiana's strawberry industry boasts a superior product overall, particularly with regard to taste. Surveys will define consumer preferences between the alternative products with respect to characteristics including size, color, and price.

- 2) Evaluate local promotion and merchandising of Louisiana strawberries and competitors. This will include product merchandising at the retail level, including pricing, promotion, and positioning within stores.

Results will be provided to the Strawberry Promotion Board and to the industry as a basis for discussion of existing and future programs.

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