

# Fields near Belle Glade yield a rice surprise

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Tuesday, May 06, 2008

BELLE GLADE — If you thought rice paddies were something found only in Thailand or China - or maybe in Louisiana - think again.

More than 10,000 acres of rice paddies normally thrive each summer in Palm Beach County, the state's only rice-growing region. Each spring the long-grain and medium-grain rice is planted in laser-leveled fields flooded with water.

Last year, 70 million pounds of rice were harvested in the fall, said Eddy Salazar, vice president of West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp.

Salazar oversees the company's 30-employee Sem-Chi Rice Products Corp., which owns and operates Florida's only rice mill, located off County Road 880 east of Belle Glade.

Rice and other grains such as wheat and corn have taken center stage worldwide recently as their prices have reached record highs, with shortages reported in some developing countries.

But rice supplies in the United States are more than adequate to meet demand, said Nathan Childs, a U.S. Department of Agriculture economist.

"The reason prices spiked in late winter, early spring of '08 was due to trade embargoes by several major exporters," Childs said Monday. "That was a response to rising food prices in their countries."

In April, U.S. farmers received an average of \$14.80 per 100 pounds of rice, the highest monthly cash price ever reported, Childs said.

In western Palm Beach County's Everglades Agricultural Area, this year's plantings began in April.

But because of the South Florida Water Management District's ongoing water restrictions, the crop is being planted later than usual, Salazar said. When that rice is harvested, that will be it. There won't be the usual second crop that is usually obtained from the same plants.

Even to flood the fields enough to plant the seeds, water allocations were taken from other crops, said Modesto Ulloa, director of farm operations for Florida Crystals' sugar

farms cooperative. "We use as little water as possible, just enough to cover the soil, to prevent weeds," he said.

The rice plants, resembling a sea of verdant grass, grow in about two inches of water. But the past few weeks have been dry.

On Monday, Ulloa said he's halting planting until it rains.

"The soil is so dry, " he said. "We have only planted 10 percent that would have usually been planted to date."

Rice in South Florida is planted largely as a rotation crop to sugar cane, the area's biggest crop. Growing rice restores the soil, removes unwanted pests and also provides a habitat for many species of native wildlife.

Despite the water restrictions, Salazar said the company will still be able to fulfill its contracts. Its major customers are Winn-Dixie and Goya Foods. He estimates the crop will be around 40 million pounds this year.

Florida Crystals spokesman Gaston Cantens said the company expects to lose millions of dollars because of the smaller crop. Lower prices are locked in to some of its long-term contracts.

Each 100 pounds of rough, unmilled rice yields several kinds of food. Sem-Chi gets 70 pounds of rice grain, 20 pounds of rice hulls and 10 pounds of rice bran out of it, said Rene Gonzalez, Sem-Chi's mill manager.

Of the 70 pounds of rice grain, about 12 percent will be broken grains, which are used to make flour, popular for those on gluten-free diets. Organic rice flour is used to make cereal for baby food.

While Florida Crystals grows the bulk of the rice, other farms nearby, such as Hundley Farms and Roth Farms, also plant a few hundred acres apiece.

Rick Roth, president of Roth Farms, said rice prices have risen 50 percent in the last month. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to plant it at all, because of sky-high diesel fuel prices.

Sem-Chi, operating for nearly 30 years, will probably continue to be a one-of-a-kind operation in Florida, and the rice industry probably will remain one of Palm Beach County's best-kept secrets.

"When I bring people here, they are amazed," Salazar said.