



Ag Exports Rebound from Shipping Trouble



Hurricane Katrina changed the way Mississippi crops leave the state, and more than a year later some producers are still dealing with the change.

Mississippi's port at Gulfport and the ports at New Orleans and Mobile serve as exit points for much of the state's crops. Katrina damaged each of these ports, wiping the Port of Gulfport clear of all its structures and temporarily closing the others. Today, all are back in some level of operation, but Gulfport is still in the worst shape of the three.

The Port of New Orleans handled about half of the state's grain exports before Katrina. Much of the nation's grain came down the Mississippi River and was shipped out from this port. Steve Martin, an agricultural economist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service operating from the Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville, estimated that those exports have regained most of their pre-Katrina status.

"Grain shipments were backed up last fall after Katrina hit, so it took longer and cost more money, but shipments still traveled down the Mississippi River to be shipped from New Orleans," Martin said. "The only real problem was the expense caused by the delay."

Martin said the river system is running smoothly now to handle this fall's harvests, assuming river levels do not drop too much lower.

Poultry exporting, however, is radically different than it was before the storm.

Mike Pepper, president of the Mississippi Poultry Association, said the Port of Gulfport was vital to the state's poultry industry.

"We depend on cold storage. Before Katrina destroyed the facilities there, we were able to drop off a trailer at the Port of Gulfport and have it unloaded and stored until the ships came in," Pepper said. "Our product has to be in cold storage, and the facilities at Gulfport were completely wiped off the map."

Poultry companies have coped with the destruction by moving their shipments mostly out of New Orleans. Pepper said Port of Gulfport officials intend to rebuild the cold storage facilities bigger and better than before, but they are awaiting final insurance and Federal Emergency Management Agency settlements.

"The key is getting a state-of-the-art facility," Pepper said. "Our goal is to have modern facilities with blast freezers. That's what the competition has in Mobile and New Orleans, and they are working to make sure they can have it in Gulfport, too."

Pepper said ports from Houston to Jacksonville, Fla., absorbed the poultry export traffic that had gone through Gulfport, but authorities are confident they can regain that business once they overcome their obstacles and rebuild.

"I think they are very confident they can regain the business they had prior to the hurricane and get even more," Pepper said.

In May, the Mississippi State Port Authority announced the completion of a 105,000-square-foot warehouse. The port intends to add almost 300,000 square feet of additional warehouse space by mid-2008. The port handled more than 2 million tons of cargo in 2005 and has set a goal of exceeding that tonnage in 2006.