

State Senator Robert Mayer The Mayer Memo

Senator Robert Mayer - Serving Butler, Dunklin, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Ripley, Stoddard & Wayne Counties



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Promising Possibilities for Bootheel Rice Growers

JEFFERSON CITY — This week, the annual Rice Day featuring rice-inspired dishes made with rice grown in southeast Missouri was held here at the Capitol. Dozens lined up for a delicious meal provided by Greg Yielding of the U.S. Rice Producers Association and received samples of Missouri-grown rice from Sonny Martin of the Martin Rice Company of Bernie, Missouri.

Coincidentally, the event was very timely, as we all heard news this week about global rice shortages and learned that some of the nation's largest retailers are limiting large bulk purchases of rice, which is affecting businesses, particularly restaurants, which buy rice in bulk. Regular retail-size packages of rice are still available in unlimited supply.

The global rice shortages are attributed to lean harvests, trade restrictions, rising fuel prices, more demand for food in China and India and other emerging nations, and more crops grown for biofuel instead of food. The drought last year in Australia — which completely wiped out its rice crop — also contributed to the decrease in world supply. There just isn't enough to go around, so several countries, including India and Vietnam, are banning exports to protect their own stockpiles, and countries like Thailand, the number-one rice growing country, are cutting exports. Rice prices have skyrocketed to near-historic levels (around 75 percent globally).

While other areas of the world are not so fortunate, there is positive and encouraging news to report about Missouri's rice industry, which last year included approximately 177,000 in rice acreage throughout southeast Missouri. My advisors in the Missouri rice business tell me that while production costs are up and rice acreage is down from two years ago, southeast Missouri may be the only place in the world well suited for increasing rice production, with more than 400,000 acres potentially available. In addition, Missouri quite possibly has the lowest cost of producing rice in the U.S., thanks to an unlimited groundwater water supply that provides the necessary flooding conditions for growing rice.

Currently, Missouri is fifth-ranked in the country for value of rice production and exports primarily to Mexico and Central and South America. While the U.S. does not produce a lot of rice, it exports approximately 50 percent of its approximate 8 million tons per year, which gives it major status among exporting countries. (We

import approximately 13 percent of our rice for domestic needs, particularly specialty rice products such as jasmine and basmati rice.)

There's even more promising news to report about Missouri rice. When Greg Yielding was here for the rice dinner earlier this week, he mentioned that China is very interested in importing Missouri rice for its supermarket chains. He personally visited China and conducted taste tests and discovered the Chinese people liked the vitamin- and mineral-fortified, high-quality rice produced here in our own state.

In addition, researchers are currently spending time in the bootheel exploring cost-efficient ways to turn rice straw into a form of ethanol. Rice straw is left over after rice is harvested and is usually thrown away or burned.

Here at the Capitol, I continue to work to support Missouri's rice industry. Just this week, the Senate adopted a resolution I proposed that urges the U.S. Department of Agriculture to add June 1 and September 1 as additional rice reporting dates on the Agricultural Statistics Board Calendar. The resolution is now under consideration by the Missouri House, and I hope they will also endorse our efforts to send a convincing message to Washington that this is vital for capturing more accurate pricing that reflects current market prices and rice stocks.

Missouri rice...it's good for lunch, dinner, a snack...and maybe your stop at the gas pump...somewhere down the road.

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