

Daily World



Business booming at sweet potato facility



By **BETTY ADAMS**
World Staff Writer

POPLAR GROVE - Though this is the first harvest season and the first year of operation for Arkansas Delta Yams, the management team is already making plans and putting together a proposal to expand their facility in order to double their capacity by the 2008 harvest season.

The storage and processing facility is located off Highway 49, west of Walnut Corner and east of the Phillips County Maintenance Shop.

Local growers have been reporting from a low of 375 to a high of 505 bushels of sweet potatoes per acre, which according to Bruce Leggett is as good as anywhere in the South. Leggett is project director for Central Arkansas Resource Conservation and Development.

Four Phillips and Lee county farmers are owners of Arkansas Produce Marketing Association, which is a limited liability corporation. These farmers work in the plant during the busy season.

The facility has five full-time and 30 part-time employees who work when needed - washing, grading and packing the sweet potatoes.

The plant workers were preparing two shipments Wednesday and Leggett said that Bright Harvest Co. buys potatoes for canning and Gerber Farms, one of the largest brokers in Louisiana, is selling other produce for the local corporation.

Leggett said that right now the only problem is getting enough workers for a harvest. It averages between 25 to 30 workers but need about 60. The weather also is hampering the harvest but once the rain stops workers can

(See Potatoes on Page 2)

Picking out the best sweet potatoes

Employees of Arkansas Delta Yams pick out the sweet potatoes that may have a blemish or spot and remove root hairs from the succulent tubers before they are shipped to market. (Cindy Neal Photo)

Leggett said that Dr. Gerald Geisler of Winrock International would visit Phillips County to help the farmers set up their LLC.

Cindy Neal, coordinator for the project for CARC&D, works through USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Neal explained the process the sweet potatoes go through before being shipped. First, she said, they dump a 20-bushel crate into a vat or washer. They come out of the washing vat onto an

assembly line operation where workers remove sprouts and root hairs and a brush-clean them. Botran, a non-toxic preservative, is placed on the skins preventing them from getting scratched.

Six people on each side grade the potatoes on a conveyor belt and pick out the potatoes with spots.

Grade 1 potatoes must be 3 1/4 inches long. No. 1's go to grocery stores and No. 2's, which are still good potatoes but don't meet the required

specifications, go to canning factories. There also is a demand for the jumbos.

From the grading, the potatoes drop to the automatic sizer that sends No. 1,2 or jumbos where they are supposed to go. Near the end of the line is a final inspector who checks the potatoes before they are put into a box. They make sure the right potatoes go into the right box. At the end of the line the potatoes drop into a box and are placed on one

of three stacks ensuring that each box weighs exactly 40 pounds.

The storage facility currently holds 110,000 bushels. With additional grant money the capacity of the facility can be expanded to accommodate 94,200 additional bushels. Within five years it could reach a 1/2 million bushel capacity storage.

The lines are already constructed to handle 1/2 million bushels without buying additional equipment.