Russ Houston

TEACHERS TRAIN AT MSU'S "AGRIPOD"

While students enjoy their summer vacation, many of their teachers themselves become students.

That was the case with eight high school agriculture teachers who trained this summer at the new Agricultural and Environmental Science and Technology, or AEST, Laboratory on the Mississippi State University campus.

The lab, funded by the state Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Technical Education through special funding from the Mississippi Legislature, is the only one of its type on a university campus. It is a high-tech octagonal environment that consists of a central project work area surrounded by state-of-the-art computer workstations. Because of its design, the lab has been dubbed "Agripod."

The teachers in the three-week summer program gained the endorsement to their license required to teach the AEST curriculum.

The curriculum is designed to move students from a very basic knowledge of agriculture to what it takes to run an agribusiness, said Bill McGrew with the Mississippi Department of Education.

"The first course of the curriculum introduces students to basic information about agriculture," he said. "If they are interested, they can move into the more advanced courses in following years, including ones on managing an agricultural enterprise."

The courses are geared to Mississippi agriculture.

"The curriculum was developed by Mississippi teachers, with input from the agricultural business community," McGrew said. "A similar computer-based instructional system had been developed by Applied Technologies of Calhoun, Ga. Our teachers presented the curriculum they developed, and Applied Technologies made changes to their modules to meet the Mississippi curriculum."

Magee Enterprises of Brandon represents Applied Technologies in Mississippi and has installed 48 of the labs. There are currently 154 agriculture programs in Mississippi, 48 of which have AEST labs and more are planned.

The teachers who trained on the Mississippi State unit during the past summer included Karen Cook, a teacher at the Monroe County Vocational Complex. The curriculum, she said, uses technology her students are already comfortable with to introduce them to what, for many, are new aspects of agriculture.

"Many of my students think of agriculture as just driving tractors and things like that," she said. "This shows them the technical and business opportunities available in agriculture."

A second group of high school teachers will train at the lab during the fall, and MSU students in agricultural education also are using the facility.

"With this facility, we'll be able to certify our students to teach agricultural science at the secondary level," said Walter Taylor, head of the Department of Agricultural Information Science and Education. "In the past, they had to go through three weeks of training after graduation to become certified."