

# A Cotton Review

*There Is Hope For Cotton In A Good Rotation, Specialist Says*

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Rainfall made last spring the toughest spring many farmers have seen in 30-40 years, according to Dr. Darrin Dodds, extension cotton specialist for Mississippi State.

"If you look back at some historical rainfall data, we had about half of the amount of the rainfall in January and February that we normally have and this is based on data from 1892 to 2008," he said. "We had an average March and April but then when we got to May we had 11.2 inches of rain in Clarksdale which is our biggest cotton area in the state. Typically we have about 4 1/2 or 5 inches up there. The 11.2 inch rainfall made this the fifth wettest May since 1892."

About 40 percent of the crop was planted before that date, and about 20 percent went in during that rainy period which was about May 4 to May 25. From May 25 to June 8 the remaining 40 percent was planted. However, some of the crop that was planted prior had to be replanted.

"Obviously when you get that much rain you're going to lose some to seedling disease, some is getting washed out of the fields, and we saw some replants because of that," Dodds added. "The other lingering issue due to excessive rainfall is with regrowth and development because with all of that early season moisture the plant just didn't put down a deep root system like it normally would. So we have basically a shallow rooted crop."

Many who have irrigation don't like to turn it on until first bloom. Dodds said that concerns him because of the shallow roots.

"It got very hot and very dry in June, so I think we probably hurt ourselves and the weather hurt us because those roots were so shallow the crop struggled to take up water and nutrients," he said. "I have cotton of my own that went from not blooming to cut out in about two to three weeks so our maturity period has been compressed because of the hot dry weather. The cotton is pretty short, some of it is probably not going to lap the row middles. It was a problematic spring is the best way to sum it up. Fortunately, we had received rainfall during July and August which will be of benefit."

Resistant weeds such as horseweed are a problem all of the time, and farmers have been fighting them for several years.

"About the time I think we've got a good handle on horseweed I start getting calls about how to control horseweed later in the season," Dodds said. "Horseweed tends to germinate mostly in the fall of the year, but will germinate to some degree the better part of the whole year. I'm still getting calls about how to kill horseweed with a hooded sprayer. We thought we had this problem under control and then it comes back to bite us again."

Italian ryegrass is another weed that's resistant to glyphosate but I'm not convinced that that's the only type of Italian ryegrass that we're fighting," he continued. "I think because of the cooler, wet conditions we've seen in the spring in the last two years especially, we're seeing glyphosate resistant Italian ryegrass, and, we're seeing Italian ryegrass period. Once it gets some size it becomes very difficult and expensive to control. It usually takes two applications of any material to do it and we're still having problems with that."

Palmer amaranth is also a problem in some counties, although it doesn't seem to be spreading very far south, according to some of the consultants.

"However, within known areas of glyphosate resistance, it seems to be expanding rapidly," Dodds said. "It's just a matter of time before it expands out of those counties in all directions, north, south, east and west."

Another issue affecting cotton down the road is the pricing structure of other commodities, corn and soybeans in particular. They have become very attractive in relation to cotton because cotton prices were low and farmers were essentially farming it for loan value.

"Pest pressure also has affected cotton," he added. "Two years ago we had probably 20,000 or 25,000 acres that got 15 applications for plant bugs and that certainly played into the mind of some of these growers," he said. "When you start talking about spider mites historically it has been quite expensive to control them, although miticides have come down in price this season."

Still, Dodds said the management level required for raising cotton concerns him most. Cotton is very management intensive.

"It does not come out of the ground very strong, and grows off slowly early in the sea-

son," he said. "It's a weak plant early on. However, once cotton gets some size, you then have to restrict growth through the use of plant growth regulators (PGRs). In addition, cotton is prone to insect issues, you have to defoliate it, and it's sensitive to water, so there's a lot of management required. One comment that I've heard multiple times is, 'do you know how much better I've slept in the summer time because I didn't have any cotton?' That change in mindset is what scares me more than anything. Prices have improved lately; however, these folks have gotten into the grains and they don't



**Dr. Darrin Dodds, Extension Cotton Specialist for Mississippi State discussed 2009 rain and it's impact on crops.** Photo by John LaRose, Jr.

have to fight plant bugs or spider mites, they don't have to fight PGRs, they don't have to fight defoliants, all these things. It's that management level and the mindset around cotton compared to other crops that is really concerning to me."

He said it's uncertain where cotton acres are going. Last year there was about 285,000 acres, down from about 365,000 in 2008, about 667,000 the year before and about 1.2 million the year before that.

"We've certainly dropped a lot of acres and a lot of that has been due to price; however, a lot of the pest pressure that we've seen has been because of the shift of the cropping acres," Dodds added. "Certainly a lot of these pests, like the plant bugs and spider mites, build in other crops and plants. We've learned our lesson with corn in particular that these populations will build in corn and migrate out of corn into cotton when corn dries down."

The inputs that go along with cotton compared to the inputs that go along with corn make a drastic change.

"Corn is not a whole lot cheaper than cotton on a per acre basis," he explained. "Cotton would take about \$600 per acre to grow whereas corn can exceed \$500 per acre, so it's not tremendously cheaper for corn. If you just look at the seed cost for corn as compared to cotton, it costs about as much to put that seed into the ground for corn as it does cotton. However, corn prices have been very favorable over the past several months, although they have declined recently. If you can make 200 to 225 bushels, the profit margin is larger when prices are up."

"The cheapest to plant of any of the major crops is going to be soybeans. You're looking at \$300 for soybeans versus \$700 for cotton, \$500 for corn, and that's an issue in the economic times that we face. We're in an economic crisis right now. Certainly if you go to a bank and tell them you need \$700 an acre to grow a cotton crop and you might or might not make that back, the banker is probably not going to be jumping up and down to give you that money; however, if you have irrigation and you can show a very positive profit margin on soybeans he's much more apt to give you \$300 an acre for soybeans than he is \$700 an acre for cotton."

Being a historical person, Dodds likes to think of what cotton has done for Mississippi. A lot of the agriculture in the Mississippi Delta was built upon cotton and cotton has helped folks get where they are.

"I hope to see cotton come back; however, I don't know if we'll ever hit 1.2 million acres again but if we get into a rotation with corn, that should provide a positive benefit for both crops," he said. "If we get 750,000 acres of cotton into a rotation with corn, I'm not convinced that's not where we should be anyway. Certainly with corn we can get some residual fertility as well as organic matter back into the soil. I hope folks will remember what cotton has done for us. If the price is right, I hope they are willing to go back to cotton and maybe get in a rotation which can provide positive benefits all the way around." Δ

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