

Arkansas Farmers Face Huge Risks In 2008

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Spring flooding, repeated rains and cool weather have pushed many Arkansas farmers into a corner, and they're faced with the prospect of lower yields and greater out-of-pocket expenses.

"Continual showers keep pushing planting back for many farmers. We're to the point now, there's no other crop option than to plant soybeans," said Dr. Jeremy Ross, extension soybean agronomist with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, Dr. Chuck Wilson, extension rice specialist, said the rice crop is two and a half weeks behind normal. "We'll probably see some yield loss," adding that it could be 5 percent or more compared to normal.

Dr. Tom Barber, extension cotton specialist, said farmers were way behind in planting, but have been planting furiously, when possible, between showers.

"Last week, we caught up a lot," he said. "However, much of the earlier planted crop either didn't emerge, or it was unhealthy. Most farmers have had to replant some acreage."

Dr. Scott Akin, an extension entomologist, said late planted crops will be "like a magnet" for late season insects such as stink bugs and caterpillar pests. "Bollworms can decimate a soybean crop. Farmers can't afford not to spray if pests are above threshold levels."

Dr. Gus Lorenz, another extension entomologist, said farmers' budgets are stretched extremely thin, and they don't need anymore problems and expenses. But that may be out of their hands.

"We're going to have some very late cotton this year, and we're going to have some late season problems from plant bugs, bollworms, the army worm complex and loopers," he said.

"We have a lot of rice to be planted, and there's a potential for water weevil and rice stink bug problems. We're already seeing high levels of water weevils."

When farmers plant corn late, they have corn borers and many other late-season pests, Lorenz said. He advised farmers to be vigilant and monitor crops closely because "you can lose a corn crop quickly to corn borers."

"We've got a mess out here," said Dr. Ken Smith, extension weed scientist at the Southeast Research and Extension Center in Monticello. Smith said a lot of land has had flooding that brought in "a whole new batch of weed seed."

Many farmers are trying to plant in fields that aren't clean of weeds, and they'll be fighting them the rest of the growing season, he predicted.

Dr. Rick Cartwright, extension plant pathologist, said blast and other leaf diseases may have a field day in rice, depending on the weather.

"Getting the crop in late can magnify these diseases. This is a different situation than farmers face in normal years because we couldn't hit the optimum planting dates. But we have some strategies that can help farmers," he said.

Another extension plant pathologist, Dr. Scott Monfort, said late planted corn is at much higher risk from leaf diseases such as southern rust. He said aflatoxin, another disease, could be a problem, depending on the weather. Soybean farmers will have to worry more about Asian soybean rust.

"Farmers have to do everything they can to minimize risk," he noted. "The extension service can help them, if they'll let us know their situation. We have all kinds of tools, and we can plan a strategy to minimize risk." Δ