

Breaking Ground

Young Farmer Gleans High Yields From Hybrid Rice

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Branching out to farm on his own was always a given for 30-year-old Ryan Riley, a fourth generation farmer from New Madrid, Mo.

"I started farming the year after high school," he explained. "I graduated in 1995 and I put my

hold of my representative. He will tell me what to do to help me out any way he can."

His RiceTec representative is Brian Otis, technical services representative covering Southeast Missouri and Mississippi county, Ark., and he's available 24 hours a day.

"We all kind of work together," Otis said. "We do some sales and but mostly my job is to work with the growers calibrating drills, just kind of



Ryan Riley from New Madrid, Mo. started growing rice in 1999 and three-fourths of his 2007 rice acres were in RiceTec hybrids.

Photo by John LaRose

first crop in in 1996." That wasn't too big a stretch, since he recalls his first tractor driving experience during his first year of Little League when he was seven or eight.

When he struck out on his own, he rented 300 acres for soybeans breaking ground with equipment belonging to his father, Robert Riley Jr. Now he farms 2,500 acres, 80 acres of which became his first land purchase last year.

"We farm ground independently, but we help each other," Riley said. "Still, I have my equipment and he has his equipment."

Riley's first bean crop turned out spectacular. "I had a really good year my first year," he said. "Beans were about \$8.50 that year and I made a good yield and so I made money. It took a few years after that to make money again."

That's because the bottom fell out of the prices.

With his own operation today, he uses two full-time and two part-time helpers to grow 500 acres of cotton, 800 acres of corn, 700 acres of rice and the rest wheat and beans. Rice is a rather new crop for him.

"My dad has always grown cotton, then in 1999 we had some land that was in the river, and a tree company wanted that land," Riley explained. "They had some land that was suitable for growing rice. So we traded, and 1999 was our first year of growing rice. We started with 2,400 acres our first year and we are down this year to about 1,250 acres of rice."

One reason for the cut in rice acreage was the problems that cropped up last spring when some seed was contaminated with GMO seed. Riley put most of that ground in soybeans and a little corn.

In 2007, about three-fourths of his rice acres were in RiceTec hybrids.

"I am growing more and more of it, but 2006 was the first year that I tried any of it and I was really impressed with it," he said. "We did have a big rain come through the first of September that year. We had 18 inches in like 36 hours and we lost a lot of rice on the ground. In every variety we lost rice that just fell out. But I cut some of it and I was really impressed with it before the rain so I planted a lot more of it in 2007. You don't have to worry about diseases so much as RiceTec has a good disease package."

That year, a lot of the rice fell out on the ground. Whole fields from all varieties were on the ground due to the wind and rain.

In 2007 his RiceTec varieties were 729, a Clearfield hybrid, and 723, a conventional. His next two favorite varieties are Francis and Wells. "They are the best two yielders that I have had."

Generally his rice yields are up to 160 to 170 bushels, however last year he had one 80-acre field of RiceTec XL723 that yielded 240 bushels.

As the combine rolled through the field during this interview the counter was showing 216 bushels

"That is an average, that is not actual," Riley explained. "It is probably better than that."

The field had the same variety that earlier had averaged 240 bushels, but there was a little red rice in the field and it was pulling the yield down.

"RiceTec don't handle weed pressure real well," Riley commented. "If you have a clean field that is where it shines, when it has no pressure. Even being a little thin, it does better than being a little thick."

However, the Clearfield varieties handle the weed pressure exceptionally well, but there was only a limited supply of Clearfield rice last year.

"This was in beans last year," he said. "We didn't think it would be that contaminated with red rice and we rotated it. We got it in so early that a lot of the red rice came up the same time that the RiceTec seed did."

Without breakdowns, Riley can combine 80 acres a day. However, breakdowns are part of farming.

"Despite good equipment it all breaks down," he said.

Ryan's combine is used to cut the rice, and his father's combine cuts the corn and beans.

After two years of growing RiceTec seed, he's wanting to increase acreage if the seed is available.

"I keep upping my acres more and more with it," Riley said. "I really like it. It seems to be doing really good. It yields great. You've got good support. Any questions I have, I can always get

educate them on how to grow hybrid rice, because it is a little bit different as far as the fertility management. Seeding rate obviously is different and if they have calls about weed control I do what I can to help them.

Riley plans to stay with the same acreage for rice this year, but is looking at some new lines of RiceTec varieties.

"RiceTec has some new varieties coming out and usually when they come out with something it is always upped a step," he said. "It is one step better, so of course I want to try some of the newer varieties, but I think it is going to be the same problem. It is going to be hard to get hold of those, so you have to get your order in quick."

If he could get it, he'd go 100 percent with RiceTec, but he knows the limitations of growing it.

"You need to be on top of it," he said. "I mean you need to cut it a little wetter, because so much rice will fall down in bad weather. Now if I had 2,500 acres of rice, I don't know if I would plant that much, but with 1,200, it is pretty easy for me to get 1,200 acres out, and I believe I could go 100 percent RiceTec then."

While he has the soil type to produce 2,500 acres of rice, Riley plans to stay with 1,200 acres.

"Unless rice prices go up some more," he reasoned. "With inputs so high, it is hard to stay away from \$9 beans, its hard to get away from them, being that inputs are cheaper on beans.

So his rice acres this year will be dictated by how much seed he can get.

RiceTec does have lower fertilizer, urea and nitrogen needs, and blast or sheath blight treatment is not needed.

"It can be really costly at \$50 an acre to treat for that, so with the yield increase from RiceTec and you don't have to treat for fungus, it probably saves money to use RiceTec seed," he said. "If you have certain places where you have fungus like that, it gives you a little bit more leeway. You don't have to spray for those unless it is just terrible."

Riley uses minimum tillage, working the ground no more than he has to to overcome rutting in the fall.

"We have rutted and we went to wide tires to try to keep from rutting so deep, but minimum tillage is our method," he said. "We would like to no till if we could, but in rice it is kind of hard in the ground that we have."

He rotates two years of rice with one year of beans, depending on the red rice problem.

"If a field has a bad red rice problem we may go two years of beans with a year of Clearfield before the year of beans," he explained. "The last year of rice will be Clearfield, then we will go a year or two of beans. We didn't rotate that much before, but we didn't have red rice. We had some virgin ground that didn't have any rice on it, so we went a long time before we saw a bad problem of red rice, and it has just kind of grown with the acres that we pick up."

He believes the red rice is spread by water fowl, by equipment, and it also comes in seed.

"If you aren't careful where you get seed or if you buy bin run seed, sometimes you will get burnt buying cheap seed," he said. "You need to make sure that the seed is clean."

Riley harvests rice with a Shelbourne stripper header.

"It strips the head right off the rice and leaves all the stalk," he explained.

After harvest, if it stays dry he will roll it down and burn it, but if it rains he will take a rice roller in the mud and roll it in.

"We roll it in to get the stalk to decay," he said.

Riley uses a consultant to help him manage his crop. Wendal Minson of Bootheel Crop Consultants is consultant.

"He comes weekly and helps me out, looks at any questions that I have," Riley said. He makes my chemical recommendations. looks for pests, fungus or anything I like that. Without him, It would cost me a lot more time." It is a service that pays for itself. "Every penny."

Minson's service is a program approach.

"We go all the way from fertility, variety selection, all the way to determining when to cut the rice, so we have a full deal, 24 weeks of scouting filled every week," Minson explained.

Riley and his wife, Elizabeth, have one three-year-old son, Matt, and a daughter, Joebeth, who was born Jan. 30. Δ