

Committed To Cotton

Turnage Will 'Dance With The Girl Who Took Him To The Dance'

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Patrick Tunage will be one of 12 farmers and 17 researchers who will be making cotton presentations during the National Conservation Systems Cotton & Rice Conference. During the two day event, there will be 63 researchers, 46 farmers and five VIP's for a total of 114 speakers.

Whether it's battling The Mississippi River or fighting drought conditions or other challenges of farming, Patrick Turnage tackles the problems and salvages a respectable portion of his crops.

In 2011, the Mississippi River upset some of his cotton production plans, but he fought back and wound up falling only 700 acres short of his anticipated cotton acreage of 3,000 acres. A natural breach in the Little Farmers' Levee interrupted the plans of many farmers in his area. However, he

HAITI, MO.



and his partners, father Sonny, and uncle Duke Turnage, picked up a little more ground in Missouri to counter that somewhat. Half of the Turnage acreage is in Southeast Missouri and the other half is in Tennessee. Yields last year ranged from 700 to 1,400 pounds per acre.

Then the past summer during the worst drought anyone could remember he experimented with the frequency and moderation of irrigating cotton, and found he could get the water to the end of the row at less expense by watering every two to three days while at the same time he could avoid stressing the plants.

At first he watered some fields every two to three days, and waited a week to water some other fields. He asked himself the question: "Would you rather drink all you need in a week in one day, or would you rather spread it out multiple times every day?"

His point is: "Do not be afraid to turn on the water. It's not good to wait. It's not so much that it was dry, it wasn't that there wasn't any moisture there, but it got too hot.

"People get behind because they don't want to spend the money to irrigate that often," he said. "However, it actually costs more money to get the water to the end of the row when you wait to water weekly. It also takes two to three times longer to get the water out there when you water every seven days.

"Once I started seeing the advantage of watering often, I did that on all the irrigated cotton," he said. "If I had waited it would have taken me 24-36 hours longer to accomplish what I was doing in eight hours; it would have created more expense, and the cotton would have been going through stress."

The past summer he began irrigating cotton

on May 18 and continued until Aug. 22. Normally, he would start watering the first of July and water for six weeks, but this year's drought changed his irrigation plans. It didn't take him long to realize that watering more often would help all his cotton through the drought.

Cotton was a staple crop for the Turnage family through three generations when his father turned to soybeans in the late 1970s. Patrick was 9 when the family got back into cotton, though today he still raises 1,500 acres of soybeans.

"I knew I didn't like cotton at that time, but I learned it was paying for everything we owned," he says. "That's when I really started getting interested in it. We only had 1,000 acres then, but in the past five years I have taken us from 1,700 acres of cotton to 3,000 acres.

Two new 7760 John Deere round bale cotton pickers helped with the harvest in 2011.

"We purchased those pickers and started grading our ground then, and are irrigating more and more every year," he said. "We have

already graded 40 acres and are working on 60 more acres now. Hopefully we will get that done and will have an additional 100 acres graded by next year. We do it a little bit at a time."

One third of his 3,000 acres is irrigated now and, despite the heat and drought, the yield on that this year was 1,100 to 1,500 pounds per acre. The dryland cotton produced 600 to 1,100 pounds per acre, an amount which he defines as "very well."

Turnage and several other partners also own a profitable and successful gin. "It's been a good thing for the community and we have great cotton consultants," he says. "You get the right people in the right places and it all starts to click."

His future plans are to improve more ground by putting it to grade and irrigating more and more land.

Turnage reports that the five Southeast Missouri counties that produce cotton normally outproduce the entire state of Mississippi. Concerning his cropping plans, he says "I'm going to dance with the girl that took me to the dance. To me, cotton has always been here. They fought a war and wrote songs about cotton, and they never did either about soybeans."

He has a bachelor's degree in agricultural mechanization from Murray State in Kentucky. A fourth generation farmer, he has been driving a tractor since he was 8 years old and has been making the farming decisions since 2004.

He is a volunteer firefighter with the Haiti Fire Department, has worked at a cotton gin, and for John Deere part time. His family has been farming for over 50 years. Δ

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