

# Cotton Acreage Could Continue To Spiral Downward In 2009

**LITTLE ROCK, ARK.**

**A**rkansas cotton acreage appears to be poised for another decrease in 2009, as cotton falls out of favor with farmers because of low prices and increased input costs relative to other crops, especially soybeans.

the economy.

“With soybeans, the production risk is a lot less, and they’re easier to grow,” Barber said. “You’re not risking \$800 an acre like you are by growing cotton.”

Meanwhile, carryover stocks of cotton from



Cotton has been on a downward slide since 2006 when it was 1.17 million acres. In 2007, it fell to 860,000 acres, and it tumbled again to 620,000 acres last year. In the early part of the 20th century, cotton was king in Arkansas, according to the Arkansas Agricultural Statistics Service.

The largest cotton acreage recorded in that century was 3.577 million acres in 1930. In that year, even farmers in the mountains of western Arkansas planted cotton. It hovered around a million acres much of the time in the latter part of the century.

Dr. Tom Barber, extension cotton specialist with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, said the acreage planted this year will be up in the air through February or March because of concerns over prices.

“Soybeans have been in the \$9 a-bushel-range compared to last year when prices got up to as much as \$15 a bushel,” he said. “If soybean prices continue to go down, we could see cotton acreage remain about the same as last year. If soybeans go up, cotton acreage could fall by about 30 percent to 400,000 acres.”

He said cotton prices also play a part, adding that a surge in cotton to 80 cents a pound in February or March could spur an increase in cotton acreage.

Barber’s gut feeling is that cotton prices will increase.

Another factor playing into the acreage picture are the risks of growing each crop and

last year are 7.1 million bales. Consumers aren’t buying as many cotton products because of the struggling economy, Barber said.

The most recent consumption estimates from the USDA were lowered by 2.75 million bales, mostly from decreased consumption in China, Barber said.

“Cotton farmers in north Arkansas picked a much better crop than farmers in south Arkansas, mainly because extended rainy periods caused by hurricanes led to tremendous hard-lock and boll rot problems,” Barber said. “This resulted in at least a 30 percent yield reduction. Although average cotton yields for Arkansas are currently reported at 1,022 pounds of lint per acre, most farmers reported decreased average yield in 2008.”

Meanwhile, Barber said farmers will have to do their homework in variety selection for 2009. Increased emphasis must be placed on new varieties containing Flex or BollGard II plus Flex because current varieties containing BollGard will be phased out by 2010. Monsanto, the maker, is not re-registering BollGard, in 2010. This will limit farmers on the varieties they can plant, and in turn farmers will need to try new varieties on small or limited acreage to prepare for the change to BollGard II in 2010.

About 50 percent of Arkansas cotton acreage is planted in the older BollGard variety. Barber said many farmers in northeast Arkansas have already switched over to the newer varieties. Δ

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