

# Cotton Already Declining Before Disastrous 2009

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MISS.

Mississippi's cotton crop hasn't caught a break in recent years, and reduced acreage and devastating weather at harvest pushed the 2009 crop's estimated value to just \$97.8 million.

In 2008, the crop was valued at \$250 million, so the estimated 2009 value is less than half what it was a year ago. Cotton had a recent high of 1.2 million planted acres in 2006, but fewer than 300,000 were planted in 2009 and only 365,000 acres in 2008. In 1930, the state planted a record 4.2 million acres of cotton.

Adding insult to injury was an estimated loss of nearly 50 percent in value during the growing season, mostly due to fall weather that destroyed the crop waiting for harvest.

"This year will most likely be remembered as the most difficult growing season that many, if not all, of our growers have ever seen," said Darin Dodds, cotton specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service. "People have to go as far back as the '50s to find challenges even approaching what we faced this year."

Dodds said about 40 percent of the state's cotton acres were planted just in time to face the fifth-wettest May since 1892. Thanks to localized rain, some producers were able to plant about 20 percent of the crop during the wet month, and the final 40 percent was planted from the last week of May to the first week of June after the rains quit. However, some early-planted cotton had to be replanted after the wet weather passed.

Summer challenges included August-like weather during June and cool weather during the later part of August that did not provide the heat units late-planted cotton needs to mature. Despite the rocky start, Dodds said the crop looked great near the end of summer.

"If the crop would have produced what it looked like during mid- to late August, I think we would have had a state record crop," he said. "The cotton in mid-August was absolutely beautiful." But rains started again and did not quit from September through most of October. The crop began to experience problems with hardlock and boll-rot, and when producers were able to harvest, they saw significant yield reductions. Harvest typically begins about the third week of September, but in 2009 it began in earnest in mid- to late October.

Dodds said while 2009 will go down in history as an amazingly bad year, more than weather has contributed to cotton's decline from prominence in Mississippi. Price is a major factor in cotton's lost status as the state's top row crop.

"Other row crops are more profitable because of high input costs associated with cotton and low prices over the past several years," Dodds said. "Soybeans generally cost about \$200 to \$300 an acre to grow, but it takes \$600 to \$700 per acre to plant cotton. On paper it looks more profitable to plant other crops."

George Mullendore of Starkville retired after a long career spent working with cotton, including 15 years with MSU as the Extension cotton specialist. When he began his career, the state was consistently planting more than a million acres of cotton annually. "The price of cotton today can't compete with the prices that corn, soybeans and rice have been receiving for the last few years," Mullendore said. "The profit potential of 'alternative' crops has taken acres away from cotton. It's no question why it's cost us cotton acres." In addition to input prices and low

market prices, pest pressure also has contributed to a decline in cotton acreage.

"Over the past several years, we experienced tremendous problems with tarnished plant bugs in the Delta," Dodds said. "In addition, many growers had to battle spider mites. Pesticide applications to control these pests detracted from the profitability of cotton and caused growers to consider planting other crops." Once the scourge of the Cotton Belt, boll weevils have been eradicated in Mississippi, but tarnished plant bugs remain a major problem, causing some farmers to move acres away from



This cotton boll is ready for harvest, but much of the cotton planted in the state was ruined by wet weather. The crop lost nearly 50 percent of its value before it could be harvested, driving the estimated value of the 2009 crop to just \$97.8 million, less than half what it was a year ago. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Kat Lawrence)

cotton. Dodds said some producers made 15 insecticide applications for this insect this year.

Mullendore said tarnished plant bugs were a serious problem back in the 1970s, too.

"We used to have to spray 15 times for boll weevils, and it didn't cost nearly as much for that as it does for an application for plant bugs,"

A more indirect factor affecting the number of cotton acres in the state is the amount of money invested in equipment for grain production and storage, Dodds said. Producers who put money into this infrastructure want to make their investment pay, so they may plant more grain than cotton. Mullendore said technology has improved cotton production, eliminating much of the labor once required to produce the crop. Increased equipment size, genetic engineering of the plant, module builders and more have increased the efficiency of cotton production.

John Michael Riley, Extension agricultural economist, said it cost about \$450 to \$500 per acre to produce a bale of cotton in the mid-1990s.

"When this historical cost is adjusted for inflation, it is in line with today's cost of about \$600 to \$650 per acre," Riley said. "In 2000, a MSU study found that every dollar spent on cotton returns \$1.54 to the state. This value has declined, according to a 2007 study done by Louisiana State University which found the return on cotton in Mississippi was \$1.45."

Dodds said he thinks it is reasonable to expect cotton acres to reach 600,000 to 700,000 acres as the crop moves back in rotation with others. "Farmers today have equipment for all crops and can adjust very quickly to take advantage of the best return on their dollars. Cotton acres will continue to be heavily influenced by market turns," he said. Δ



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