

Cotton Faces Final Hurdle: Harvest

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MISS.

Mississippi's cotton has overcome one hurdle after another all season, and fall weather is all that stands between respectable yields and the finish line.

Darrin Dodds, cotton specialist with Mississippi State University's Extension Service, said "challenging" is the one word that sums up the 2011 cotton crop.

"It has been a year of challenges. It was cold in the spring at planting time, then very hot in June. We had a lot of moisture in May, then dry weather in June. The crop has had plant bugs, spider mites, worms and finally bacterial blight," he said. "Despite all of that, most growers should pick a respectable crop. However, rains from tropical depression 13 are causing concern."

At this point in the growing season, rain is more detrimental than helpful. Winds and heavy rains from a tropical storm could turn profits to losses overnight. High winds and heavy rainfall can cause cotton to string out and fall to the ground, especially if the crop has already been defoliated.

"In addition, once bolls crack open, rain increases chances for boll rot and hard lock and decreases yields and quality," Dodds said. "Once a cotton boll rots or hard locks, it essentially becomes unharvestable, which can in turn cause yield losses."

Extension entomologist Angus Catchot said about 75 percent of the cotton acres are past the point of needing further insecticide sprays. Some of the late-planted cotton is facing late-season plant bugs and spider mites.

"We were able to stay on top of the insect problems throughout the year and should not have significant yield losses from insect pests," Catchot said. "Our cost of production for insect control should be similar to past years."

MSU Extension plant pathologist Tom Allen, who is based at the Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville, said the challenge of cotton leaf diseases is becoming a fall tradition.

"Over the past five seasons, we have encountered foliar fungal cotton diseases the last week of August. Leaf spots appear to be worse this year than in the past several years," he said. "The presence of bacterial blight is making it difficult to determine the cause of leaf shed."

Allen said several different fungi can cause foliar leaf spots in cotton, and determining the exact cause can be extremely difficult. In addition, even though the environment has been hot and dry for the duration of the summer, excessive boll rot has been reported throughout much of the Delta.

Favorable prices inspired Mississippi farmers to plant about 600,000 acres of cotton this year, up 43 percent from acreage planted in 2010. Δ



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