

Cotton Picking Situation Leads Some Farmers To Sing The Blues

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MISS.

As the harvest season finally gets under way in Mississippi, some cotton producers are “pickin’ and grinnin’” while others are woe-fully singing a different tune.

“Dryland cotton yields of 850 to 900 pounds of lint per acre have been reported; however, this is on very limited acreage. Many growers have reported at least some damage to their cotton while others have damage at disastrous levels due to excessive rainfall,” said cotton specialist Darrin Dodds of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

“The north Delta does not appear to be suffering as much damage as areas farther south. Cotton in the north Delta was planted late and, in turn, was later maturing, which protected it to some degree from all of the rainfall,” he said.

Rain slowed the pace of harvest from what it normally is at this time of year. Mississippi received more than 7 inches of rainfall since the first week of September, with some locations receiving significantly greater amounts. This slowed defoliation applications and harvesting.

As of Oct. 4, less than 1 percent of the crop was picked. Producers usually have 45 percent to 50 percent of the crop harvested when October begins.

“We had a tremendous crop and outstanding yield potential back in August when the weather was dry and temperatures were optimum for boll development,” Dodds said. “By the third week of August, temperatures dropped, and when they came back up in September, the rains set in.”

The combination of excessive rainfall, warmer temperatures and the resulting humidity created a situation conducive to boll rot and hardlock. Boll rot is caused by an array of different

diseases that affect the quality of the lint.

“If the bolls are cracking or are open already and weather like we have had the past several weeks sets in, the lint starts to deteriorate,” Dodds said. “You then run into yield and grade problems because lint may be unharvestable and/or quality is reduced.”

Hardlock, perhaps a more frustrating problem for many producers, occurs when the fiber does not fluff out. Lint quality may not be affected, but the spindles on the cotton picker cannot grab the fiber. The unharvested bolls eventually fall to the ground.

“Both conditions are bad for producers because they contribute to yield and/or fiber quality reductions,” Dodds said. “Affected areas report yield losses ranging from 10 percent to 75 percent.”

While some producers have had no cooperation from Mother Nature, they may find some relief within the cotton market.

“Prices are back on the rise,” said Extension agricultural economist John Michael Riley. “Mississippi was projected to yield 960 pounds of lint per acre, but I suspect we will see that estimate come down because of the wet weather we’ve experienced for so long.”

Cotton futures during the summer were on a roller-coaster ride as they varied between 55 cents and 65 cents per pound. Riley said fluctuations stemmed from the rise and fall in the U.S. dollar and the concerns about drought in India, a major world cotton supplier.

“If the current weather persists, producers in Mississippi can expect prices of nearly 60 cents a pound,” Riley said. “If the weather breaks and pickers start rolling, prices probably will slip a little. Producers then might be looking at prices around 55 cents.”

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