

Cotton Progress

Despite Wet Weather Delays, Mississippi Cotton Shows Promise Of Good Yields

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Cotton farmers in Mississippi faced the same cool, wet weather experienced throughout the South, MidSouth and North Central parts of the country. That accounted for delayed plantings and, in some cases, a switch in acreage to soybeans and corn, both of which have exceptionally strong markets.

Still, cotton should be a profitable crop this year, although not as profitable as other crops, according to Steve Martin, agricultural economist at Mississippi State University's Delta Research and Extension Center.

Cotton prices last year averaged 46.8 cents per pound, he said. This year, December futures prices were near 80 cents per pound during the first week of May.

"With our carryover of 10 million bales, we would not have 80-cent cotton if it weren't for the national acreage reduction," Martin said. "Even on reduced acreage, we will produce more cotton than we use domestically, which is about 4.5 million bales."

One Mississippi farmer who's intent on cashing in on the cotton market is Mike Walton, manager of Kirby Wills Plantation at Robinsonville. Walton raises rice, corn, wheat, soybeans and cotton on a small 1,500 acre block.

He planted Americot 1550 Roundup Ready flex cotton on a 35 acre field on April 21.

"We had several wet spells come through," he agreed. "We were very limited on when we could get in the field. Some days we could work and then it would rain us out, but we were fortunate that we caught some windows and got this cotton planted early."

Mid-April is a good time for planting cotton in this area, but the wet weather gave him some concern about timely planting.

The farm's soil types lend themselves to all the different crops.

"It does," he said. "We put wheat on the best land out on the highway last fall so we could harvest it and hopefully get a good crop of irrigated soybeans," he said. "We had to move our cotton back to some marginal, medium soil. However, this year is the

In addition to raising rice, corn, wheat, soybeans and cotton, Mike Walton also plants 20 acres of sunflowers to draw birds. Dove season is a big event on this farm.

Photo by John LaRose

first year we've had the Americot 1550 in this field. In the past we've always had Americot 427 Roundup ready only, and it's done well for us year after year."

Americot cotton has been a standby for him for four or five years, although he also uses two other cotton companies, staying with a medium maturity group.

"All Americot is pretty much a medium maturity and we try to stay in that range," he said. "We don't want it to be too late. We've got rice, corn and some early beans that we need to get out, and we don't need everything coming off at one time. We try to spread the harvest out. We can get started on these other crops and then go into the cotton." He plants about nine pounds to the acre on cotton.

Walton used no pre-emerge, still weed pressure in the Americot field was at a minimum following an over-the-top treatment of Roundup. Later he applied some MSMA and Caperol, just to change the chemistry.

The field had been hipped up prior to planting in April.

"We try to get the field ready in the fall and we'll still come out and run a hippo through it in the springtime," he related. "This year we're using anhydrous ammonia which is more economical. We run the hippo just to apply the anhydrous."

The weeds were well under control since fall. If a burn down were needed, Walton would apply Roundup and 2,4-D early in spring. However no weed control was needed over the winter.

The first herbicide treatment was applied two days after planting.

"We came in over-the-top right after we ran the planter through it to clean it up," he said. "Then we came back May 19 with another shot of Roundup."

He hopes the MSMA and Caperol will buy him enough time for the crop to canopy, but he's prepared to do another over-the-top application if needed.

"We put 90 units of anhydrous down pre-plant and then came back and sidedressed it with 30 units of liquid N32," he said. "The soil sample showed everything else to be fine so we hadn't had any other inputs than that."

At eight weeks into growth, Walton's cotton was knee high and showing promise for a good crop.

"I think it's coming along fine, very fine," he judged. "This Americot here was the first we planted so it's probably a little ahead of everything else we have."

Americot varieties is something the local seed dealer wanted him to try.

"We keep using it year after year so I think that speaks for itself," he said. "If it wasn't any good we certainly wouldn't want it."

This is, however, the first year he's using all flex cotton.

"I wanted to go to flex this year because of weed pressure later in the season," Walton explained. "In late July and August, some of those weeds start coming through the cotton canopy and we will have the opportunity to clean them up if we need to with the flex."

Today his cotton crop is close to the acreage allotted to cotton 10 years ago, although the prices spurred him to plant more acreage to

other crops.

"We probably would have cut back a little farther on some cotton but some things interfered and we ended up planting more; however, in the last couple of years we've had more cotton than we have this year," he said. "We did cut back to some degree."

Corn and soybeans are better cash crops today. Cotton hasn't stayed up with those two



Mike Walton stands in a field of Pioneer 31T97 RR corn, a variety he also used last year on a good sandy soil. Although it's on medium soil this year, he's hoping to have another good year. Photo by John LaRose



crops yet.

"No, and the input costs are a lot more on the cotton as well," he stated.

Walton went with a little over 100 acres of corn, 140 acres of rice, 200 acres of cotton and somewhere around 850 acres of soybeans this year. The weather interfered with planting those other crops too. He does all this with the help of four laborers and another retiree who helps on occasion.

"Corn, we were able to get it in probably a week to 10 days later than we did last year, but not having these large acreages we're able to get in there and get done what we need," Walton said. "With the rice, we've had a local seed company use their terragators to blow the rice seed out for us. That way, we can plant rice in two or three hours, cover it and let it rain on it. So we caught a window one afternoon and got that planted."

Walton recalls some good years and some lean years of cotton production.

"We got up around 1,000 pounds some years, but we've also had some 600 pound averages too, so it just varies year to year," he recalled. "Soybeans fluctuate in and out but I'd say we can probably maintain 25 to 30 bushels on that. Corn last year was pretty good. I think we had right at 200 bushels."

About 600 acres of his land is gravity flow irrigated, so all the corn is on irrigated land.

"We pretty much string out polypipe on anything we water," he said.

Dove season is a big event on this farm. Walton plants 20 acres of sunflowers just to draw the birds to the farm.

"Back when my son was in first grade, we had our first dove shoot," he explained. "Most folks have a lot of alcohol involved in these shoots, and we wanted something more family oriented, so we started a dove shoot. A lot of kids come, we set up a grill and just have a fun afternoon with all the family members. We also invite the game warden every year to enjoy the food and fellowship."

Today that son just graduated from high school, so the dove shoot has been underway for 12 years. Often as many as 150 people attend the afternoon event. Though he will go off to college, the shoot will continue.

"A lot of college kids still call and want to know when we're having it and they always make it a point to come back," Walton said. "The kids have a great time. If they can shoot they're going to shoot the limit out on everything."

Walton thinks the limit is 15 or 13, but he's not sure because the last few years he hasn't even left the grill.

"I stay up with the food," he explained. Δ