

Cotton Yields Flourish

Boll Weevil Demise, Technology Boosts Cotton Crop Production

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Boll weevil eradication has saved the cotton crop in southeastern Louisiana, according to George LaCour, Jr., who raises 1,500 acres of cotton here. LaCour began raising cotton in 1988 when yields were only 800 pounds. Today his five-year average yield has increased to 1,000 pounds. He has even reached a high yield of 1,366 pounds.

"I like growing cotton," he said. "My father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather grew cotton. Boll weevil is what put us out of the cotton business down here."

However, LaCour got back into the cotton business after learning the cattle operation his father had pursued would not support itself.

"A friend of mine and I decided that we were going to grow cotton," he said. "We would haul our cotton 40 miles just to get to a gin at first."

"I was on the Divisional Boll weevil Commission, and the Red River passed the Boll Weevil Eradication Program before the northeast part of the state did," he continued. "I mean, we saw the need and there was a point in time about 1993 the boll weevils would take us back. Had I not seen the boll weevil eradication efforts in the southeast and not seen the onset of Bollgard Roundup Ready technology, I believe I would have had to quit growing cotton. But I could see it coming. Out of all the crops I grew, I've had more improvements in cotton, more benefits than any other crop I grow. We've made some major changes."

One of the big changes was when Roundup Ready took some of the risk out of growing cotton. At first, LaCour started with 300 acres of cotton, then 600 acres, then 800 acres.

"When Roundup Ready came along we had a plot of Roundup Ready and we saw the potential for it," he said. "Actually, before Roundup Ready cotton – and that's original Roundup Ready, not the flex – we were limited by how many tractors we had, how many cultivators, how much labor and how fast we could get over the field."

"Before Roundup, if you'd catch a wet spell in the spring, it would keep you out of the field two or three weeks, and the weeds would take over," he explained. "Staple would have only been out one year when Roundup Ready came out. Staple was the first herbicide that came out that we could use over the top of cotton."

LaCour got into farming 28 years ago. He was away at college when his father passed away, so he came back home to farm. However, he soon learned that he couldn't make a living on the cattle operation his father pursued.

"I was taking care of cows, I wasn't farming but a couple hundred acres of corn, and it didn't take long to figure out you couldn't make enough money raising cattle down here in this type of row crop production farmland," he said.

At first he raised 200 acres of soybeans. He quickly learned he needed to diversify.

"We went back to growing corn because corn was out of the field before the hurricane hit," LaCour said. "At that time the soybeans were ready, so we learned not to put all our eggs in one basket."

Today he raises 1,500 acres of corn, 2,000 acres of soybeans and 1,200 acres of sugar cane along with the cotton crop. He explained the rotation.

"We'll plant cotton, then we'll plant corn behind the cotton, and then we'll plow up the corn stalks and plant wheat; we'll follow that with beans and then we'll go back and plant cotton behind the beans," he said.

His sugarcane requires a little different treatment.

"Being that it's a three year crop that most seed stock takes, we may grow a crop of beans between the last crop of cane before we replant it the following fall," he explained. "We may, it just depends on whether we get enough time to plow out the stubble."

His early attempts at cotton production found him constantly in the field.

"We never quit, I mean we were plowing cotton before we got through planting cotton," he said.

The trips down the field were quickly curtailed when Roundup Ready cotton came along. He went from maybe 15 trips across the field to seven.

"After Roundup Ready we didn't dig up the cotton plants plowing them, and we increased the yield but we used herbicides at first that weren't friendly to cotton," he said. "It was kind of like chemo and radiation, it's a necessary evil to get rid of the cancer. Some of the herbicides we used to use, if you got it up on the plant too high you just cooked the plant. And now with spray cotton, when weeds show up and if it's late we'll spray one more time with a hood and lay it by so we'll spray four times."

He finds he can control the weeds using only spray rigs.

"We used hoods to spray underneath and we've had to keep those hoods and when we get

our flex cotton we will be at a point where I can plant a cotton crop and walk off," he surmised.

LaCour has 50 acres of flex cotton this year, but he finds the yield a little lacking.

"There's a yield drag that has to be addressed before we go into it more," he said. "The scary part is that because using triple nickle Roundup – I should say Bt-1 and standard



Raising cotton since 1988, George LaCour, Jr., says boll weevil eradication has saved the cotton crop in southeastern Louisiana.

Photo by John LaRose

Roundup Ready gene cotton – we got a group of varieties coming along that we don't know what they're going to yield. I mean the variety that Monsanto is going to push next year was on my farm this year. In two years I won't have any other choices, that'll be it. So we've got one more year of regular Bt-1 with varieties that yield consistently high yields and then we may have to back off our cotton acres because we can't find a variety that will yield, all because the EPA has refused to re-register Bollgard 1 and Monsanto hasn't pushed it since it is more profitable for them to sell Bollgard II."

LaCour said varieties from 20 years ago actually had a better yield potential than the ones do today.

"However, we just didn't have the potential to manage the risk as well as we do today with boll weevil eradication, Roundup Ready and Bollgard."

LaCour uses Deltapine, Stoneville and Phyto-gen.

"I've grown Stoneville seed every year since I've been growing cotton, I just can't seem to get enough of it that will yield with the Delta and Pine," he explained. "The Phyto-gen varieties have a lot of promise, they've come along in the 25 percent of my acres that I planted. We don't move very fast, we don't change varieties quickly, we try them out first."

Raising cotton is very specific to this area. Yield data from 60 miles away will not apply here.

"We've seen yields from varieties in the past 20 years that have done great at Northeast Research Station and we just couldn't make it work here, and we would have varieties that would yield great here and they didn't yield at Northeast," he noted.

LaCour raises everything on a 38-inch bed, spacing the soybeans 19 inches apart on the bed.

"We bed everything, from day one we have a Bingham paratill, we'll rip, then we have an Orthman with middle busters on it," he explained. "The middle busters are tillers that make a bed, then we'll run that behind the paratill, then we go home for the winter."

"If we have a dry year, cotton is our best crop," LaCour said. "We will make a 120-bushel corn crop and we'll make a 2 1/2 bale cotton crop. We made a 165-bushel corn crop this year, we had a 2 1/2 bale cotton crop, strictly because the farm I had the cotton on didn't get rain until the hurricane."

His cotton is all dryland.

"It's the crop that will take dry weather better than any other crop," he said. "The rivers down here go up on the levees 10 feet, 15 feet depending. There's moisture in the soil, and cotton has tap roots so it'll go and find it."

LaCour sees cotton continually in his future, but admits the future looks bleak, especially with the hurricane damage he's seen.

"When you just get 20 inches of rain and 100-mile an hour winds in one day, you know it's hard to stand up against that," he said. Δ