

Rice Faces Challenges, Slow Start This Spring

STONEVILLE, MISS.

Fields along the Mississippi River may be flooded, but the majority of the state's rice crop is farther inland and needs either more water or time to dry after heavy rains caused other rivers to overflow.

Nathan Buehring, rice specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, said rice fields do not need to be flooded until after the plants are about 6 inches tall. Farmers often will "flush" water over the field to prompt early growth.

"Some rice fields in Quitman County were flooded early by the Coldwater River. Rice can survive a couple of weeks under floodwater but will become more stretched and elongated," he said. "Some of the flooded fields that stayed under water too long needed or will need to be replanted."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture predicted in March that Mississippi farmers would plant 200,000 acres of rice, down from 305,000 acres in 2010. Buehring said the acreage estimate is probably high and predicted 150,000 to 175,000 acres.

He said cooler temperatures have slowed growth but should not impact yields.

"Frequent light showers have made rice lazy, meaning plants did not have to generate deep roots," Buehring said. "That also means when it turns dry, the plants will stress more easily."

After rice reaches the appropriate height and farmers have applied fertilizer, they will flood the fields to help with weed control and for crop growth. Water remains on the fields until about two weeks before harvest.

John Michael Riley, Extension agricultural economist, said prices are better than they were a year ago and flooded Arkansas rice fields will likely run prices even higher. Some estimates indicate just over half of Arkansas' 1.4 million acres of rice have been planted.

"Arkansas produces 46 percent of the nation's rice, and they have more fields impacted by river flooding and heavy rains than we do," he said.

Riley said the May futures contract for rice ended at \$13.80 per hundredweight, or 19 percent higher than last year's price. The harvest contract price (September) is currently at \$15.28 per hundredweight, or 36 percent above the September 2010 contract for this same week last year and 30 percent above the September contract price at harvest. Δ