

State Rice Crop Attempts Recovery From Weather

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MISS.

An unusually wet May is causing some farmers to plant rice late, but the crop still has time to develop into a good one for the Delta.

Farmers could see decent prices, too, if several market factors play out by the time harvest occurs. They expect to complete planting by early June if rains relent and fields dry out. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that Mississippi's rice crop will total 240,000 acres when farmers are through.

While rice can tolerate some excessive rain during germination, the plants cannot emerge if water is standing over them for an extended time, said Nathan Buehring, rice specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

He said farmers need dry fields for the plants to develop before they flood fields. "Rice needs to be at the five-leaf stage, which is from 6 inches to 8 inches tall," Buehring said. "In fields where rice had been planted, rain and wind have made herbicide applications difficult, and that has also slowed crop development."

He said he is confident farmers will finish planting within the next two weeks if fields dry out and weather is sunny and warm. If not, some will switch to soybeans because of the later optimum planting window that crop has.

"It's really a question of what the weather may do," Buehring said.

The bigger production issue of 2009 is replanting some acreage damaged by wet weather.

"We had to replant more rice acreage in the last two weeks than in past years because we've had 12 inches of rainfall or more in some areas within two weeks," Buehring said. "Some replanted stands will develop late, and some will be thinner."

Coahoma County Extension director Don Respass said some rice fields in his area are in an "awful state," a situation that may raise production costs. Despite weather problems, farmers in Coahoma County planted about 15,000 acres this year.

"A big problem occurs when farmers have to buy additional rice seed and herbicides," he said. "Replanting delays and late plant emer-

gence bring in another set of weed control issues that can reach deep into the pocketbook."

Respass said there is hope the Delta's rice crop will recover from its slow start. "Rice is the most consistent crop we can grow in the Delta because it yields well and fits in with many crop rotation systems our farmers have," he said.

The Washington County rice crop is off to a good start, said Extension area agent Lester Stephens. Farmers there have planted at least 30,000 acres of rice, but final tallies could put the crop closer to 40,000 acres when the remaining fields go in.

"The plants are up and growing," Stephens said. "Our farmers have more to do, but generally the crop is looking pretty good."

Weather has slowed the rice crop in Bolivar County, Stephens said. Farmers there will have about 57,000 acres of rice when planting is finished.

"All rice farmers in the Delta are working hard to produce this crop," he said. "They just need sunshine and some heat."

Despite weather-caused delays, rice will be profitable for many rice farmers this year if market prices maintain their current levels, said Extension agricultural economist John Michael Riley.

"Harvest-time rice prices have been holding steady within a range of \$11.50-\$12.50 per hundredweight," Riley said. "The firmness of these prices depends upon what happens in the field."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is projecting a general increase in rice acreage around the world and higher yields for 2009. The agency estimates the domestic rice crop will be 3.183 million acres.

Good field conditions and expected yield potential may work together to maintain decent rice prices for farmers. Poor growing conditions and declining yields may tighten supplies, and prices could go higher, Riley said.

"These crops no longer stand alone. They are all linked in some fashion," Riley said. "What happens in the soybean or corn markets will have an indirect impact on rice." △



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