

Weather Delays May Impact Yield For Arkansas Rice Crop

STUTTGART, ARK.

After enjoying a bumper crop in 2012, Arkansas rice growers are bracing for a challenging harvest in 2013 because of an unusually cold, wet spring that has delayed the planting season.

"The record yields obtained in 2012 are not a realistic expectation for 2013," said Jarrod Hardke, extension rice agronomist with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "I am optimistic that we will accumulate a sufficient number of heat units to make good yields, but those hopes could be dashed by an early cool spell in the fall."

Soil temperature is important to germination, and warmth, as measured in heat units, can help producers predict plant growth rates.

Between March 16 and May 13, the number of heat units was 506, the lowest accumulation in the last 20 years. However, warmer, drier weather later in the month has allowed growers to recover somewhat, with planting progress approaching 80 percent, according to Hardke.

Seventy-three percent of the crop had emerged, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Rice or soybeans?

Many growers are still deciding whether to plant their rice crops this year or switch instead to soybeans.

"If they are locked into planting rice on particular fields, then I would strongly recommend planting a hybrid, as we are pushed into planting in June," Hardke said. "Hybrids have generally been observed to be better at handling variable conditions, though conventional varieties can also perform well with proper management."

The late planting season presents a challenge for growers on two fronts. First, late-planted rice tends to be more susceptible to disease. And a later season means rice could still be in the fields when tropical weather hits later in the year.

"Some weather experts suggest increased hurricane activity this production season, which has the potential of exposing our rice producers to damaging tropical storms with strong winds and pounding rains," said Robert Coats, professor-economics with the Division of Agriculture.

Last year, Arkansas rice farmers found themselves racing to harvest ahead of the remnants of Hurricane Isaac. (See: <http://bit.ly/10TNgfw>)

"The later the planting date, the later the harvest date, and with a late harvest date comes increased risk of tropical storm damage, which may cause rice to lodge, or simply go from standing straight and tall to lying on the ground," Coats said. "Once a part or the majority of a rice field lodges, then the harvesting time and costs rise significantly."

Disease risks

One of the diseases of primary concern in late-planted rice is blast, a pathogen that attacks the rice plant. As growers increase their use of nitrogen fertilizers to compensate for the shorter growing season, unfortunately, these fertilizers can also be a feast for the pathogens that cause blast, according to Yeshe Wamishe, extension plant pathologist with Division of Agriculture.

However, "if farmers have treated with a fungicide when they see symptoms, which most of them do, and also keep a constant deep flood, that likely wouldn't be that much of a problem," Wamishe said. The fungicide needs to be first applied before heads have emerged and two applications may be needed, she said.

Two other diseases of concern with late-planted rice are bacterial panicle blight, as well as two kinds of smut, kernel and false, particularly in fields which have been affected by these diseases in the past. These smuts can be combated with fungicide; however, bacterial panicle blight presents a bigger challenge, according to Wamishe, who said rice pathologists are still working to fully understand how to fight this disease.

Strategies for combating bacterial panicle blight require planting more resistant varieties of rice -- including hybrids and Jupiter. High potash, constant deep flood and a less dense canopy during the season may also help, Wamishe said.

The challenging environment for rice growers in 2013 follows a banner year in 2012, when rice production in the Natural State topped 9.3 billion pounds, up almost 20 percent from the previous year, with a yield of 7,300 pounds per acre planted, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Price volatility

Last year, Arkansas growers planted about 1.29 million acres of rice. This year, planted acreage is expected to drop about 5 percent, to about 1.23 million, Coats said, citing a USDA survey of growers. Coats said USDA is currently estimating a 2013-14 marketing year price similar to 2012-13. "This is a reasonable preliminary estimate given current domestic and global fundamentals. That said, prices will likely remain very volatile due to the aggregate economic setting with prices potentially surprising both to the upside and downside," he said.

Over the past five years, a challenging production season for Arkansas growers "has emerged as the norm," according to Coats.

"Few, especially outside the agricultural sector, appreciate the production risk exposure and uncertainty our rice producers face. It is not only production risk and uncertainty, but economic, market, policy, and trade risk and uncertainty," Coats said. "Our rice producers are world-class. They anticipate future events, and they plan accordingly." Δ



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