

South pins hopes on hurricane rain

By THE FARM PROGRESS COTTON TEAM

AN active hurricane season with low-category storms could be a blessing for some, including farmers in the region encompassing Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Alabama and eastern Tennessee. As farmers here forged ahead with their crops in mid-June, their highest hope was for a break from the dry, unwavering heat.

The long-standing drought brings new management considerations for growers accustomed to a regular spray schedule.

"Because of the lack of rainfall and the lack of subsoil moisture, I believe we should be careful and conservative with plant growth regulators, but a little more aggressive than normal with irrigation," says Steve Brown, University of Georgia cotton specialist.

Mid-South cotton farmers have come to expect plant bug problems. "Last year we had a problem with people using low-drift tips in July and August," recalls Angus Catchot, a Mississippi State University Extension entomologist. "Those are the kinds of tips farmers left on after applying glyphosate. We are after a pest that is oftentimes deep in the canopy, inside squares, and not as easy to control as it used to be in light of resistance. In the face of resistance, we need to go after plant bugs with hollow-cone tips or flat-fan tips with high pressure."

Key Points

- Drought delayed planting from Texas to the Carolinas this year.
- Low-powered hurricanes could help recharge wells.
- Drought could influence the way growers use technology.

Based on the resistance of plant bugs to some crop-protection materials documented last year by USDA-Agricultural Research Service scientist Gordon Snodgrass, Catchot recommends the use of products like Centric, Trimax, Intruder and Carbine prior to first bloom. He believes in mixing up the chemistry and saving Orthene, Vydate and Bidrin until after cotton has bloomed.

Early season drought across a large part of the Cotton Belt has probably been the biggest player in shaping the 2006 cotton crop so far.

Since many Texas farmers delayed planting because of drought, the cotton crop will be later in 2006, making mid-season management even more critical.

Insects in Texas

"When we're talking midseason here, one of the more critical times is during the first three to four weeks of squaring," says Rick Minzenmayer, Integrated Pest Management coordinator for Runnels and Tom Green counties in Texas. "We need to watch for fleahoppers to make sure the cotton is setting as much fruit as it can. ... It's better to load and save fruit

from earlier in the season than to try and push the cotton hard in real late season because that's so expensive."

Minzenmayer does not expect a bad year for bollworms in 2006. The numbers in south Texas weren't big early. It's possible a hurricane could sweep them in, however.

"Our heaviest aphid problems are in August," he notes. "Aphids suck the carbohydrates out of the plant. So if cotton already is stressed with August heat, aphids could really damage cotton."

In the rolling Plains' north-central territory, where temperatures soared to near 110 degrees F in June, the cotton outlook has been shaky.

"If it was this hot in June," laments Todd Baughman, Texas A&M Extension agronomist, Vernon, "it makes you wonder what late July and August will be like."

After two years of severe drought, many irrigation wells in his region have not recharged.

"Many of our good irrigated growers who routinely make 2 to 3 bales of cotton per acre will have to push their irrigation wells this year," Baughman reports. "It's definitely a big concern here whether growers will have enough water to push their cotton in late season."

Farther west, cotton in California's San Joaquin Valley got off to fast growth due to warm conditions and late planting. Long internodes and large leaves were common in many developing plants.

"It looks like most people delayed first irrigation at least



TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE: Taylor Slade says everything having to do with his historic Williamston, N.C., farm is old — except the farming technology. Slade grows 900 acres of cotton and 200 acres of peanuts on his 3,300-acre farm.

a few days, and in some cases, by a week or more," reports Bob Hutmacher, Extension cotton specialist. "Over the week of June 5, I was in fields from Kern County to northern Fresno County. I expected to find the first fruiting branch higher than normal and, in general, that's the case."

Cotton was mostly at nine to 11 nodes, he adds. "Retention looked just fine on the cotton that was at 13."

Thrips hit hard in East

Drought also has played a big role in the Carolina-Virginia region this season, causing many cotton growers to plant late. When rains finally came, they brought cold temperatures and damp working conditions. Rain following Tropical Storm Alberto brought welcome moisture and some flash flooding.

Thrips here have appreciated this year's weather. "We had a very warm winter, and

thrips overwintered here," says Taylor Slade, a Williamston, N.C., grower and past president of the North Carolina Cotton Producers Association. "Thrips come out of the woods, the hedgerows and the turn rows and head straight to the young, tender crops."

Once young cotton plants put on growth, they can handle thrips and normally will recover from the damage.

Since Roundup Ready, weeds are normally not a big problem for Slade, but there are concerns in the region regarding resistance — particularly resistant Palmer amaranth.

Slade says *Bt* cotton varieties are a tremendous help with insect problems, but he feels he still needs to employ a scout to keep count of insect pests.

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