

Mid-South

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By **CECIL H. YANCY JR.**

WHETHER he's behind his desk, riding the fields in his pickup with journalists and congressional staffers, in the halls of Congress or representing the National Cotton Council in Geneva, Allen Helms displays a studied demeanor when he considers questions regarding the future of the cotton industry.

To mistake pauses in his delivery as a lack of knowledge would be similar to describing cotton as just another crop in the Mid-South. Allen Helms isn't your ordinary farmer. He's this year's public face of the National Cotton Council.

Already a recognized leader, Helms has served as president of the American Cotton Producers, in various positions with the NCC and as president of The Cotton Foundation.

He has taken on the role of chairman of the NCC at a time when cotton is in the vise between farm-bill politics and global trade winds. He follows a long line of prominent producers who have held the position.

Singled out

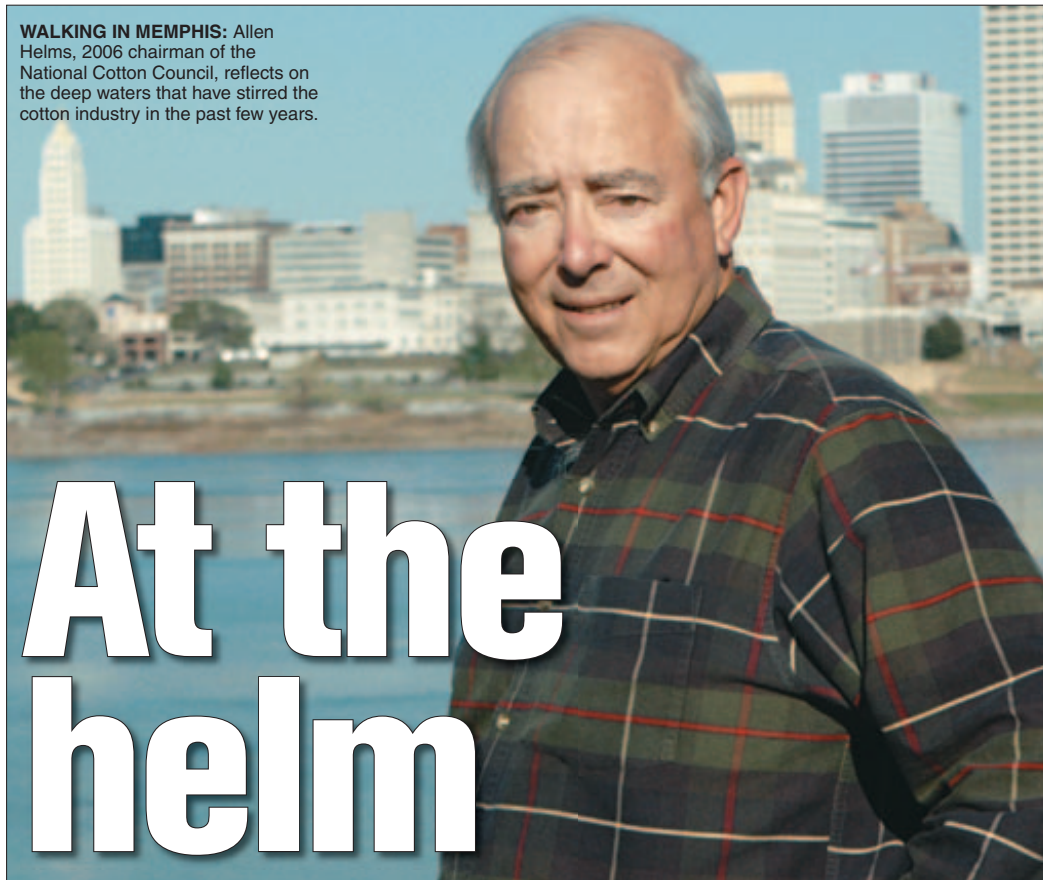
In the past several years, cotton has faced a barrage of attacks from within and without. Those attacks continue as U.S. cotton is singled out in World Trade Organization negotiations. Challenges from Brazil led to the dismantling of Step 2, while West African nations continue to call for further cuts to the U.S. cotton program.

"There's no justification for singling out cotton," Helms says, making the case that "unfair accusations of the American cotton program have been widely accepted in certain parts of the world."

Even when answering questions about the singling out of cotton based on alleged trade distortions, Helms remains calm. "I don't necessarily think we have to get defensive," he says. "I think we can state what we have and what it means. We stand behind the strength of the program that we have. It's a very serious thing that we're being singled out, [however]. We're probably the first of many. All of agriculture needs to be watching closely."

The measured way of responding comes natural to the Vanderbilt University graduate. When asked to describe himself, he pauses, studies the query, but doesn't answer right away. "That's an interesting question, to say the least," he says. He deflects the question with a quip. "Right at the moment

WALKING IN MEMPHIS: Allen Helms, 2006 chairman of the National Cotton Council, reflects on the deep waters that have stirred the cotton industry in the past few years.



At the helm

Key Points

- Allen Helms says cotton is in a political and trade vise.
- This year, the cotton industry will face challenges on global, domestic fronts.
- Helms will state cotton's case, and stand behind its program, he says.

... lost," he says. As he reflects, he navigates his pickup along the tricky back roads of Crittenden County, Ark., that lead to the banks of the Mississippi River overlooking the Memphis, Tenn., skyline. "I'm generally a pretty quiet person — pensive and quiet," he says. "I try to analyze things before I verbalize it. I try to understand the points of others, whether I agree with them or not. It makes us better able to deal with them."

Dealing with the "points of others"

has become standard operating procedure for the cotton industry in this new century. Not only does the industry face the threat from trade negotiations, but also cuts from the budget that would touch ag research dollars, and a sharp rise in the cost of production.

Helms, along with other farmers, looks at a very difficult year without the luxury of comfortable margins because of high fuel and fertilizer prices.

"It requires us to put a premium on tight cost management," he says. "The margins have been getting smaller for years, of course, and we're down to the best managers already, and I'm uncertain if we're not going to tighten up even more. At some point, prices are going to have to move to another level, or we won't be able to sustain things the way they are."

"My goal as chairman of the NCC is to achieve as much for the continued suc-

cess of the cotton industry, both from the producer standpoint and the other segments of the industry on through manufacturing," Helms says.

Amid talk of high costs, payment limitations and budget cuts, Helms believes "we need a farm bill similar to the current one, even with the absence of Step 2. We're not going to satisfy some of the things that have come up in the WTO or some of the accusations that have been made. I don't know that there's anything we can do, short of damaging ourselves."

The emotionally charged issues surrounding West African cotton production tend to negate the data supporting the U.S. cotton industry, Helms says. "The European community has used the issue to deflect criticism of its programs."

■ Read what other ag leaders think about farm-bill prospects on page 4.

**TOUGH
ON WEEDS.
GENTLE
ON CROPS.**

Roundup
with
CROPSHIELD
FORMULA