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Harvest nears starting line

By THE FARM PROGRESS COTTON TEAM

TROPICAL storm Barry was a recent reminder of one of the main challenges to cotton harvest in the Carolinas and Virginia, says Keith Edmisten, North Carolina State University Extension cotton specialist. Hurricanes can potentially damage the crop in any number of ways during the harvest season, but contamination tops the list.

"North Carolina has a reputation for good-quality cotton," Edmisten says. "That good reputation has taken a little bit of a beating in recent years with some contamination problems we've had — particularly the high-micronaire, low-staple problems we had in the mid-to-late 1990s. That has been corrected, primarily by using improved varieties, but we still have the potential for contamination in any year."

Edmisten says growers should get started with harvest as soon as possible. Timely harvest allows you to lower your risk of a storm beating up the cotton or contaminating it.

Edmisten recommends growers scout fields for contamination. "Go out early, particularly around the edges of the fields, and clean them up before you get the picker there," he says.

Another common source of contamination is clothing. Often workers wear heavy clothing out to the fields in the morning, but as the sun warms up, they begin to peel. One of these articles ends up falling over into the module, and no one ever notices it is gone.

Even a single small article of clothing can create a big mess.

"Everything is so automated today, that once the bale gets to the mill, it is unlikely that anyone is going to be able to spot that contamination," Edmisten says. "A small item can contaminate a tremendous amount of yarn. You lose a jacket in your module and get 150,000 T-shirts that are classified as seconds when they are found to be contaminated."

As a rule, he says, workers should never hang clothing on the edge of module builders.

Difficult crop in the Southeast

Bringing in a late — and probably uneven — crop will challenge growers in the Southeast.

"Even though we're off to a tough start, cotton can still come on and produce a good crop, as we saw last year," says David Wright, Florida Extension agronomist. "We have three or four crops in a field. The management is going to be real tough. It's going to be a challenge to determine when you're 60% open. Do we try to get the older crop? Do we wait for the younger crop?"

Toward getting the crop to harvest, preventing hardlock and improving quality in a crop that started under stress, Wright recommends growers add a fungicide to their insecticide treatments at bloom. Topsin M is available under a Section 18 label in Florida and Alabama.

Key Points

- Keep a close watch on the weather as harvest nears.
- New harvest aids can help bring in the cotton crop.
- Plant growth regulators may not be needed in fields hit by early drought.

"Just by controlling diseases, you pick up 100 to 150 pounds of lint," Wright says.

Cold weather will be a risk as growers near harvest with this late crop, says Eddie McGriff, Georgia Extension agent.

"We're going to have a very late crop. We may have some cold-weather challenges," McGriff says.

Defoliant and boll openers don't work as well in cold weather, McGriff reminds growers. If cold weather threatens near the time to start shutting down the crop, McGriff urges growers to start the process.

"All the warning they get may be a week, and we might not get that much," McGriff says. "Watch the weather."

If the bolls already are open, he says, a freeze won't impact fiber quality. "If they're open," he says, "you don't have a problem."

Follow-through in Mid-South

In the Mid-South, it's a timing and maturity issue. And then it's a follow-through issue.

Tom Barber, University of Arkansas Extension cotton specialist, tells growers in the Mid-South that determining when to pull the trigger on defoliation is the most important yield decision.

The general advice is to wait until 60% to 70% of the bolls are open.

Once you've made the decision to defoliate, having the right mixture and plenty of water to do the job is critical, Barber says.

"Everybody wants to get by with one pass, and that's pretty hard to do," Barber says. "But if growers try to do it with that initial shot, it's important to make sure the gallons per acre are high enough to do that and use the right-size nozzle to get good coverage."

Timing is everything in Texas

In north-central Texas, Texas A&M Extension agronomist Todd Baughman of Vernon says timing is critical. For his region, Baughman says if a grower is simply going to defoliate the cotton (drop the leaves), a product can be applied at 60% open bolls. But if he plans to desiccate the cotton (kill the entire plant), the desiccant should wait until 80% open bolls.

For 2007, cotton growers have two new options in harvest aids for defoliation. The EPA registered Blizzard from Chemtura Corp. in 14 cotton-producing



TALKING TRASH: North Carolina State University cotton specialist Keith Edmisten says growers should scout for cotton contamination before picking.

states. (Approval at press time was still pending in California, Arizona and Florida.)

Resource is a new PPO inhibitor available (except in California and New York) as a harvest aid for 2007 from Valent. And, of course, growers still have Aim and ET.

"All of them are very effective defoliant," says veteran Texas A&M Extension agronomist Billy Warrick of San Angelo. "But following the rates is extremely important."

Headed to harvest in California

Early irrigation helped get cotton going in California, but early drought stress may still take its toll, says Bob Hutmacher, Extension cotton specialist in Merced, Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties.

"Some fields have areas showing only modest improvement in vigor, even with warming weather and water," Hutmacher says. "This is probably linked to weak and damaged root systems and slow recovery. Those fields may be needy in terms of more frequent irrigations to avoid further stress, and yield potential may remain only modest. These fields will need to be monitored to assess whether or not growth and fruit retention improve."

This will not be a year for blanket, across-the-board PGR applications for all fields. Lower vigor combined with the higher fruit retention indicates that these fields should be evaluated carefully for proper irrigation and PGR decisions to sustain some growth and development of fruiting branches and positions. Growers can still realize good yield potential, but they are wise to avoid additional severe stresses such as unnecessary PGRs or severe irrigation delays.

Farm Progress cotton editors Pam Golden, Cecil Yancy, Len Richardson, J.T. Smith and Richard Davis contributed to this report.

EARLY FREEZE: A late freeze followed by a lengthy drought got the 2007 cotton crop off to a slow start in the Southeast. An early freeze on a late crop could hamper harvest, warns Eddie McGriff, Georgia Extension agent. McGriff encourages growers to closely watch the weather and apply boll openers and defoliant at optimum temperatures.

