

week Dobbs was still seeing temperatures in the 75-78 degree range.

"So even August doesn't seem to be as warm as in years past," he says. "We picked up some rain in August and now, believe it or not, we have some folks who are ready for the rain to stop (Aug. 25).

"The two things we need right now is, first, some hot, clear days and the heat to keep coming so this crop will go ahead and mature; and, two, we need to avoid any hurricanes," he says.

Overcoming Southeast challenges

Weather conditions in the Southeast corner of cotton country slowed planting and bloom, and could threaten harvest.

Yet, many growers looked across cotton fields in late August with every reason to expect good yields.

A rainy spring forced Florida grower Craig Bishop to replant 1,000 acres, cool weather in July delayed bloom about three weeks and armyworms pushed his spray schedule.

Still, Bishop says, "It looks pretty good." His only worry is whether he can bring in the crop before a freeze. "This is the latest crop we've ever had."

Fellow Florida grower Jeff Pittman's 2009 experience is similar to Bishop's, complicated by Palmer amaranth.

"You get 20 inches of rain and suddenly you've got no control," Pittman says. "We've had weed-pulling crews running all summer." With significant acreage drops again this year, the question haunting growers is whether the commodity will be profitable for them, and sustainable in their communities.

Competing commodities so far are winning the acreage battle.

"\$4 corn and \$10 soybeans get a lot of attention," Don Shurley, University of Georgia Extension cotton economist, points out. "In some cotton-producing states, peanuts are also grown and \$400-\$450 per ton or better can draw attention. Every state is different, but I know that here in the Deep South, our agronomic advantage is in cotton, peanuts and vegetables. When and if corn and soybeans return to their more typical \$3 and \$6 selves, cotton acreage will rebound — provided that cotton yield, price, payments and cost of production allow for profitable returns."

Hot weather can carry the day

Cotton producer Robbie Umphlett's experience this year mirrored those of many growers in the Carolinas and Virginia.

"The weather was wet and cool early on," says the Gates County, N.C., grower. "Cotton got off to a slow start. Some drowned and it looked bad. In fact, the weather was cool, really, up until early July. Then it warmed up a little bit, and now it is pretty."

As the end of August approached, Umphlett noted the crop was catching

up on growth.

Umphlett didn't have any real weed problems this year and, knock on wood, so far he hasn't seen any resistant weeds in any of his fields.

In an area where thrips can sometimes be a real challenge, Umphlett didn't have much of a problem. He treated all his cotton for thrips once.

"We had to spray for plant bugs. We had to spray a little bit of the later cotton for worms. It was no more a problem than usual — nothing to worry anything."

Entomologist Ames Herbert has responsibility for cotton at Virginia Tech University.

"We've had decent moisture in most of our cotton area," he says. "There are some areas where it was droughty, where cotton cut out early and it was short, but most of our cotton crop looks good. We are seeing white flowers at the top of the plant this week (Aug. 24), which is pretty much on target."

South Carolina and Virginia increased acreage slightly in 2009, but North Carolina lost a lot of cotton acres. USDA says the state's growers planted 375,000 acres of cotton this year, down from 430,000 acres in 2008 and 500,000 acres in 2009.

N.C. State University cotton specialist Keith Edmisten notes cotton recently

had a price move upward. "Still, to get any interest in a lot of increased acreage for cotton, it has a ways to go," he says. "One of the encouraging things I've seen is that the economy in the Far East seems to be turning around a bit. Hopefully that will mean some increase in demand for raw cotton in the coming year."

Late blooms should help

"With the weather moderating from earlier hot temperatures, some cotton that was looking a little ragged seems to have held onto more squares, blooms and early bolls over the past week or two," says Bob Hutmacher, University of California, Davis, Extension cotton specialist.

"If we can hang onto a good percentage of the current fruiting positions, we could significantly improve yield potential compared to what I was estimating a few weeks back during the extremely hot weather. We are still well within the time period we consider 'normal' in terms of trying to set the last bolls to carry to maturity — before Aug. 20 or so."

Fields visited in the last 10 days continue to set mid- and upper-canopy bolls, Hutmacher says.

"This includes mostly first and second positions in Acalas and first through third positions in Pimas. If we can hold a good amount of these current small bolls and make bolls out of blooms that develop in the next seven to 10 days, it will boost yields significantly. That also means less reliance on trying for those really late top crops."

Editors Pam Golden, Cecil Yancy, Len



REPLANT BLUES: Florida grower Craig Bishop had to replant 1,000 acres after rainy weather this spring. Despite the problems, the crop has turned out remarkably well.

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