

Weather rolls dice across Cotton Belt

By FARM PROGRESS STAFF

COAST to coast across the Cotton Belt, weather is the first thing farmers or specialists mention when asked how the crop is progressing. That's understandable, since weather can trump any or all decisions producers make during the season.

Texas was supposed to produce about half of the nation's 2008 cotton crop. But while 2007 growing conditions were almost perfect, this season got off to just the opposite start.

On the High Plains, day after day of 100-plus degree temperatures and relentless winds during June made for a rough start and left prospects for a repeat performance of 2007 unlikely.

Growers found the end of the planting period — generally about June 5-10 on the High Plains — to be terrible.

"The end of the 2008 planting season arrived on the heels of conditions more reminiscent of being trapped in a blast furnace than springtime in West Texas," laments Shawn Wade of Plains Cotton Growers Inc. in Lubbock.

Wade notes it's not surprising dryland cotton fields in the region were hardest hit. Nevertheless, irrigated cotton ground didn't go unscathed as blowing sand from dryland corners of fields and neighboring fields beat up on tender, young cotton plants.

During some periods of June, the National Weather Service's Pan Evaporation rate data showed evaporation rates exceeded more than 1 inch per day on several occasions.

Down below the vast High Plains region, the Rolling Plains has a longer growing season and generally can plant cotton until about June 20 in most counties. But the Rolling Plains also was blasted by oven-hot winds and temperatures that had climbed to 108 degrees in the Quanah and Crowell area, and 110 degrees at Childress by June.



COTTON PRICES LAGGING: Dan Kournegay (right) of Princeton, N.C., walks down cotton rows with employee David Sanderson to check out the crop. Cotton prices have been disappointing, and the Kournegays have cut acreage in recent years. However, Kournegay says futures still give them pricing opportunities and the crop still plays an important crop rotation role on the farm.

Key Points

- Heat and wind lower harvest speculation in Texas.
- Mid-Atlantic cotton fares decently against drought — so far.
- Continued afternoon showers needed in Southeast.

Cotton luckier in North Carolina

Weather was kinder in North Carolina where cooler temperatures and more precipitation was found.

"Cotton is probably the best-looking crop we have now," says Dan Kournegay, at nearby Princeton, N.C. "The weather was cool and wet earlier in the spring, but with no more acreage than we planted this year, we were able to delay our planting a bit and still get it all in."

In the last three seasons, the Kournegays have gone from 2,600 acres of cotton to 1,100 acres, and this year to just 500 acres. Cutbacks on cotton acreage are not atypical here, notes N.C. State University Extension cotton specialist Keith Edmisten.

"With the cool weather and with the attractive price of soybeans, some of our people didn't plant quite as much cotton as they might have done otherwise," Edmisten notes.

Southeast crop doing OK

Less cotton was also planted in the Southeast in favor or more corn, but generally speaking, the small cotton plants next to the towering corn were off to a healthy start.

"From what I've seen and heard, North Alabama looks pretty good for the most part," Alabama Extension cotton specialist Dale Monks reports. "From about Clanton south, in central Alabama and the southeast, the Wiregrass area, we've been under near-drought conditions until the last few days. It's small. It's slow getting on."

As for Georgia, state Extension cotton economist Don Shurley was pleasantly surprised by crop conditions as he traveled the state in June.

"Cotton looks surprisingly OK for now, given how dry it has been so far this season," Shurley says.

Buckling



the Belt

Variable conditions in California

The 2008 season has given California growers cool, dry weather at the beginning, one fairly severe hot and windy spell, followed by repeated periods with cooler and quite windy weather. The result is a

range of situations in June.

There are some mid- to late-March plantings in the southern San Joaquin Valley that look good, with acceptable progress in square development. April and even early May plantings in the mid and northern valley represent a broader range of conditions in terms of stand losses, variability in plant populations within and between fields, apparent leaf damage from thrips and/or wind damage, plant vigor, and progress toward squaring and bloom.

While some earlier south and central valley plantings are moving along, it looks like many later fields won't have blooms present until late June or early July.

During square development and with the threats of limited water, it will be useful to continue with some plant mapping and consistent monitoring of pests and beneficials.

25% acres cut in Mid-South

Spring rains and cool temperatures added to the problems facing reduced cotton acreage in the Mid-South, where good wheat, corn and soybean prices took acres away.

Cotton farmers in the area were expected to plant some 25.5% fewer acres than in 2007.

Frequent rains delayed planting in much of the Mid-South. In Tennessee, for example, the lateness of planting forced some farmers to go with soybeans instead of cotton, says Chris Main, University of Tennessee Extension cotton specialist.

In Mississippi, the cotton was finally in the ground just after mid-June, says Darrin Dodds, Mississippi State University Extension cotton specialist. As of June 16, only 14% of the cotton was squaring, compared with 47% last year and the five-year average of 40%.

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