April 2004

*Cotton Acreage: Where is it going in 2004?  D. Monks

Cotton acreage in 2003 settled out around 525,000 acres across the state. This was down from the previous years’ plantings due to extremely wet weather that we had last year. Many fields were either planted late or were not planted because of the inclement weather. Fortunately, the season turned out to be one of the best on record. The state yield average last year was around 770 lbs/acre (lint), just below the record set in 1985 of slightly higher than 790 lbs/acre.

There has been a lot of speculation concerning what the cotton acreage will end up being this year. That still depends on what corn, soybeans, and peanut producers decide to do. There is tremendous competition between crops on our row crop land this year. Corn and soybean prices have been very strong this season and may capture some of the traditional cotton land. According to Rob Duffield, Extension Grains Specialist here at AU, corn acreage may not see the increase once expected due to dry conditions that we have experienced during the planting season this year. It is my opinion that we will likely see cotton acreage return to our normal 600,000 acres or possibly slightly higher. I do not expect it to move much higher due to the options that producers now have to plant other profitable crops. Again, this will depend on the weather that we have over the next 6 to 8 weeks. Having these options will help the entire agricultural industry in the southeast.

*Early Season Cotton Insect Update and Scout Schools.  R. Smith

2003 was a good cotton production year for most Alabama producers. Insect problems were minor overall with a couple exceptions. Spider mites were a troublesome problem in many Tennessee Valley fields. Clouded plant bugs were present after early July over much of the state. The most damaging insect was the stink bug, which occurred throughout most of southern Alabama cotton.

No one can accurately predict what the 2004 insect conditions will be. Therefore, we must scout or monitor our fields and react accordingly when controls are necessary. Early season seedling insects to be concerned about are thrips, cutworms, grasshoppers and a few other sporadic species too numerous to list. Grasshoppers could be more prominent in 2004, especially in reduced tillage fields, due to the dryer than normal winter. As we move into the fruiting season the plant bug complex should be our number one insect
concern. Tips on how to survey for plant bugs pre and post bloom, treatment thresholds, and controls will be discussed at scouting schools on the following dates and locations: June 9, Wiregrass Research Center, Headland; June 10, Autauga County Extension Office; June 15, Tennessee Valley Research Station, Belle Mina. Programs will begin at 8:30 a.m. and continue to approximately 2:00 p.m. at each location.

In-season insect problems will depend a great deal on the variety or technology selected at planting. The dominant insect problem in Bollgard varieties will be the bug complex. Plant bugs are the dominant economic species in the northern areas and stink bugs are dominant in the south. Where conventional varieties are planted, the primary focus on in-season insects will need to be caterpillar species, especially the bollworm and tobacco budworm.

A toll-free “800” line (1-800-458-3738) will again be available with a weekly update of insect conditions. Any unusual or unexpected insect outbreak will be pointed out immediately over this toll-free line.

*Glyphosate Formulations and New Products. M. Patterson*

Most of the cotton grown in Alabama (greater than 90 percent in 2003) contains the Roundup Ready gene. A recent check of glyphosate products on the internet revealed five different formulations for Roundup brands and five different formulations of Touchdown brands along with numerous generic formulations. These products varied in the concentration of glyphosate per gallon of product (i.e. 3 AE to 4.5 AE), the type of formulation (i.e. diammonium, isopropylamine, or potassium salt), and the presence or absence of surfactant. Generally, the most expensive products have higher concentrations and surfactants in the jug. When considering what product to buy, first check the label to make sure it is labeled for over-the-top use in RR cotton. The best deal may not always be the cheapest product per gallon. For example, should you buy a gallon of 3 pound AE (acid equivalent) with no surfactant on the internet at $16.00 per gallon, or a gallon of 4.5 pound AE with surfactant at $32.00 per gallon from a local distributor backed by a major manufacturer? The 3 AE would treat 4 acres at 1 quart per acre plus added surfactant. The 4.5 pound AE would treat 6 acres at 22 fluid oz per acre and contains a high quality surfactant. The cost per acre to the grower in this example is about $4.50 for the generic and about $5.50 for the name brand. However, if a problem occurs in the field with the use of either product then customer service may be a problem for the generic user.

Envoke and Liberty-Link cotton have both received federal labels for the 2004 crop. Envoke is Syngenta’s new over-the-top broadleaf herbicide for use on all cotton varieties including conventional, Roundup Ready, and Liberty-Link. Envoke is used at the rate of one tenth of an ounce per acre. Folks, this is less than a teaspoon per acre. Make sure you use the product according to the label directions and clean the spray tank properly before spraying another crop like soybeans, corn, or peanuts. Envoke can be sprayed over-the-top after cotton has 6 true leaves and is not stressed due to cool, wet weather. Don’t add anything in the tank with Envoke other than a good nonionic surfactant. Envoke is effective on sicklepod, annual morningglory (except smallflower) and
nutsedge, in addition to several other weeds.

Liberty-Link cotton is Bayer’s new technology. Ignite herbicide can be sprayed over-the-top of Liberty-Link cotton from emergence through the bloom stage. Ignite is a broad spectrum herbicide similar to glyphosate in activity, and has no soil residual activity. You would manage weeds in Liberty-Link cotton very much like managing weeds in Roundup Ready cotton.

* Cotton Market Outlook.  B. Goodman

The Sparks acreage numbers came out late in March and had US cotton down for about a 4 ½ percent increase over last year, in terms of acreage. They had corn at 80.2 million, beans at 74.5 million, wheat at 60 million and cotton at 14.1 million acres. The USDA numbers released March 31st were higher for cotton. Of course the market took a nose dive. These were the first “real” numbers of the season for the 2004/2005 crop year. Of course, not much cotton is in the ground right now, so you know it’s just a guess. It’s an educated guess, of course, but still a guess. I drove down by the creek this week and all the fishermen were still sitting on 5-gallon buckets, so we’ll have to keep the planters parked for a while yet. As for USDA statistics, watch for some big adjustments in cotton acreage over the next couple of reports. Also, watch for the supply and demand report due out in late April. The market needs direction right now, and is grasping at straws for some indication as to which way to go. We aren’t going anywhere until something happens either way.

Last year at this time, USDA guessed that the US crop was going to run about 17.2 million bales. It turned out that we had a good year and produced about a million more than that. They thought we would export 11.5 million bales. Well, we produced more so we shipped more, nearly 14 million bales. Last spring they felt we would wind up with 4.7 million bales ending stocks, and we pulled them down well under 4 to 3.55 million bales. I write all this in the past tense, but in fact, the 2003/2004 season is not over for another 5 months. USDA missed production, exports, and ending stocks by 9, 17, and 25%, respectively. You can’t blame them; it’s the nature of the beast. They can get real close on planted acreage and still miss by a mile because nobody knows what the weather will bring.

So, if you accept the premise that acreage will be up 4%, you can extrapolate that production will also increase by 4%. Those 14.5 million acres, at last year’s yield, would produce about 19 million bales - a million-bale increase. Will that happen? Nobody knows. All you can say is that it seems logical that if acreage increases, holding everything else constant, production should also increase. Just try to hold everything else constant, though. Can’t be done.

If you took a look at the USDA numbers for the World crop from last spring, you would think that if they were off that much for the US, where we keep track of everything, they would really miss it for the world crop. They pretty much nailed it last year. They started with a world cotton production estimate of 96 ½ million and ended up last month
with 93. They were only 4% off. The reason they can hit the world numbers better than the US numbers has to do with the law of averages. If you forecast what a particular field you farm will produce you might miss it by a good bit, but if you forecast what your farm will do, you will probably do much better. The law of averages will smooth out any ups and downs across your farm and probably bring you closer to your guess for the total farm than you were in your guess for any single field.

I only bring that up because it is an important principle to remember when you are looking at statistics. In general, the smaller the sample, the greater chance of error.

So 14 ½ million acres of cotton planted, at last year’s yield, would mean a 19 million bale US crop in 2004. In my opinion nobody is scared of a 19 million bale crop. I think demand is going to be more than able to take care of that and more. We need to pay more attention to the world numbers as they come out. They are less likely to be way off.

Of course, here at the university, we all seem to be spending a good bit of time talking about what the acres of cotton and corn and soybeans are going to do just here in Alabama. December cotton at 67 cents is sure a big improvement over last year but compared to $10 beans it doesn’t look quite as good. Corn at $3.50 or so is also good competition. It’s not many years when prices of all the commodities are at these levels. The way most of us look at it is that the acreages will be pretty steady and swings will be determined by the weather. For example, we could have more corn if it would just rain. Corn planting has been shut down in many areas because it is just too dry. Some of the acreage that would have gone into corn will be shifted to beans and cotton. If planting weather is good during cotton planting season, then cotton might pick up some of those corn acres. If not, then we could see a relatively large increase in soybean acres (if they can get seed). That’s just the way farmers operate and that’s the way it will work out. It’s probably like that most places, so nobody knows what the final numbers will be. At least it’s a perfect opportunity for crop rotation.

There has recently been a lot of discussion regarding cotton quality issues facing the southeast. Of course, genetics and variety are major factors in staple length and strength, but I have to wonder if environmental factors aren’t important as well. I don’t know offhand of any study relating late season stinkbug damage to fiber quality but I do know that we pick bolls that have been stung where the boll is mis-shaped and the cotton lint is yellowed. I have believed for some time that late season insect control is an area where some farmers are really leaving some money in the field. Stink bugs are about the only insect I can think of right now where the damage affects both yield and quality, and they are not difficult or expensive to control. Not only could they cost you tens of pounds in yield, they can cost you several cents on what you do pick in quality losses. If you are picking a bale and a half cotton and you receive just one extra cent dock due to stink bug damage, the quality loss alone would more than pay for the material and application to control the stink bugs. The actual yield loss would be on top of that, and the dock could be several times higher.

Another big factor in quality is variety selection. In the past, some farmers have even
blended a high yielding variety with less than stellar quality characteristics with just enough of another, lower yielding variety that had good quality to ensure that the resulting mix was good enough to avoid discounts (for high mic cotton). The new varieties that are coming out now seem to have both high yield potential and good quality characteristics. If you are planting an older variety, you might take a look at some of these newer ones, cotton varieties seem to have come a long way, in terms of quality, in just a few years.

Finally, I want to point you to an excellent article on agricultural subsidies that appeared in the Delta Farm Press (and probably elsewhere) recently. Read it and, if you get the chance, show it to your legislative representatives. The website address is: 

*2004 Cotton Calendar.  D. Monks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Contact Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 9</td>
<td>Cotton Scout School, Headland (WGREC)</td>
<td>Ron Smith, W. Birdsong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 10</td>
<td>Cotton Scout Sch., Autaugaville</td>
<td>Ron Smith, L. Kuykendall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15</td>
<td>Cotton Scout Sch., Belle Mina (TVREC)</td>
<td>Barry Freeman, C. Burmester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July (TBA)</td>
<td>North Alabama Precision Ag</td>
<td>S. Norwood, C. Burmester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 17</td>
<td>South Alabama Precision Ag</td>
<td>S. Norwood, W. Birdsong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 29-31</td>
<td>ALFA Commodity Conf., Mobile</td>
<td>ALFA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August (TBD)</td>
<td>East Alabama Cotton Tour</td>
<td>Jeff Clary, CA*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CA- county agent.

There are two websites that you may be interested in visiting:
Weekly crop updates:  www.nass.usda.gov/weather/cpcurr/al-crop-weather
Alabama cotton information:  www.alabamacotton.com

*Reference Number: PSK-4-04, D. Monks and C. Burmester, editors
Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. Follow all directions, precautions, and restrictions that are listed. Do not use pesticides on plants that are not listed on the label.

The pesticide rates in this publication are recommended only if they are registered with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. If a registration is changed or cancelled, the rate listed here is no longer recommended. Before you apply any pesticide, fungicide or herbicide, check with your county Extension agent for the latest information.

Trade names are used only to give specific information. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System does not endorse or guarantee any product and does not recommend one product instead of another that might be similar.

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

© 2004 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved