August-September 2004

Don’t forget the tour date for south Alabama is scheduled for August 17.

* Using boll openers.  M. Patterson
* Late season insect update.  R. Smith
* Choosing the right cover crop.  D. Delaney
* State of the crop as we look towards harvest.  D. Monks
* Cotton market update.  B. Goodman
* 2004 cotton calendar.  D. Monks

* Using boll openers.  M. Patterson

August is here and the dog days are also.  It’s a good time for cotton and a bad time for dogs and people who are outside in the heat and humidity.  We know that cotton is working toward maturity and some fields may be ready for a harvest aid treatment by the end of the month.  Harvesting cotton as early as possible will generally result in the best fiber quality.  Getting the seed cotton in a module and to the gin always makes for better peace of mind.  One lesson we have learned in past years is not to have defoliated and open cotton when a hurricane comes through if possible.  Scheduling the application of harvest aids with picking capacity and the logistics of farming is a smart thing to do.  Those of you who grow peanuts and cotton often have both crops needing to be harvested at the same time.  I can’t advise you on this dilemma.

The rule of thumb for applying harvest aids to cotton is “only treat as many acres at one time that you can pick in 3 days assuming good weather”.  Most of us know how many acres our pickers can cover in a day, but picking is only part of the process.  The use of boll buggies and module builders also factors into the equation.  I believe the addition of a boll opener (ethephon) is appropriate if you can wisely schedule the application of these materials.  Prep and other pure ethephon materials normally will open a harvestable boll in 10 to 12 days early in the season when the weather is warm.  Finish can open a boll in 8 to 10 days.  Keep these numbers in mind when planning harvest.  I feel the use of these products is justified in order to obtain a once-over harvest.  If the percent open bolls can be driven up to 94 or 95% by using these products, then the money saved on a second harvest will more than pay for the cost of the chemical.  The decrease in the price of ethephon materials last year makes this an even more valuable treatment.  Every harvest aid except sodium chlorate may be mixed with ethephon products to obtain defoliation and boll opening.  Timing for these mixtures can be determined by percent open (50% or higher with no fruiting gaps), nodes above cracked boll on first position fruit (four nodes or less), and cut boll method (find the topmost boll you want to harvest and cut with a sharp knife; hard to cut bolls are ready for a boll opener).  Some fields may not need a boll opener.  If your cotton is 80 percent open and the topmost bolls are physiologically mature, then a boll opener is probably not needed since these bolls will most likely open within 10 days anyway.
* Late season insect update.  *R. Smith*

A gradual buildup of stink bugs was noted during July, especially in the southern part of the state. Stink bugs will be the primary pest we have to be alert for in Bollgard cotton for the remainder of the season.

Looking ahead: scouts noted a sharp increase in tobacco budworm moths in areas of Southeast and Southwest Alabama over the August 1 weekend. This should be a big concern for growers in these areas that have conventional cotton.

Remember that pyrethroids stopped controlling budworms in the 1993-95 time period due to resistance. It is unlikely that they will ever work again against the budworm. Therefore, for the remainder of the season, if worm populations occur, they will likely be partially budworms. This means new chemistry will be required for controls. A tank mixture of a pyrethroid plus new chemistry has a nice fit for worm control in August. Growers can tank mix their own or use the DoubleThreat product which is already co-packaged for tank mixing.

The one other pest that I should mention for August statewide is the fall armyworm. These worms are more pinkish brown than bollworms or tobacco budworms, have an inverted Y on the head capsule, and have a black dot on the 4th body segment behind the head. They will likely be found etching on the inside of boll bracts at an early age and will later move to white blooms. Our threshold for spraying should be 10-20/100 plants. Pyethroids at a high rate may be as effective as any chemical.

* Choosing the right cover crop.  *D. Delaney*

It’s hard to believe, but it won’t be long until it’s time to buy seed and plant cover crops. Since there isn’t yet an ideal cover crop, it can be difficult to decide on the right one. The best cover crop for a given field will depend on the soil type, spring crop to be planted, soil erosion protection needed, planting and termination dates, and the producer’s budget.

Small grains (rye, wheat, triticale, oats, and barley) are the most versatile and most commonly planted covers in Alabama. Cereal rye has the most winter and early spring growth, and typically produces the most biomass of the grains, but has the potential for excessive residue production. If not killed at the right time in early spring, rye can become too tall and lodge, leaving a heavy mat on the surface. While good for soil and water conservation, it can interfere with planters and result in poor stands. Experienced no-tiller producers can handle it, but you will need the right equipment and lots of patience.

Wheat is usually the easiest to manage and is often the cheapest cover crop to plant. Although it doesn’t have the tendency to “get away” from producers in the spring, it has relatively little growth during the winter and total biomass is usually less than rye.
Triticale is a cross between wheat and rye, with different varieties having characteristics anywhere between them, so that growers could choose one with more growth than wheat, but not quite as much as rye. Both winter hardy and “spring” types are available, so growers need to pick a variety that won’t winterkill in their area.

Both white (common) and black oats are available. White oats tend to have the most fall growth of the cereal grains if planted early, but can winterkill. Black oats are commonly planted in South America, and tend to have early and good (but not excessive) spring growth. The C/N ration in the stubble is also more balanced, so it doesn’t tend to tie up as much fertilizer as rye can. Its disadvantages are that it often winterkills in the northern 2/3 of Alabama, and the seed supply is still limited.

Legumes have the advantage of fixing nitrogen, with the potential to save on the spring fertilizer bill, but we generally don’t recommend them for most cotton growers. Legume decomposition can give rise to many problems, such as cotton seedling death from ammonia gas, seedling diseases, and cutworms. These problems can be minimized by killing at least 3-4 weeks before planting, but growers may have to choose between growth of the legume or late planting of cotton. For growers who want to plant a legume, crimson clover is often the best choice due to relatively early (in some varieties) and upright growth.

Many other winter crops can be planted as covers, and research is ongoing to discover their potential. Among them are the mustards and close relatives, such as rape, canola, and radishes. It has been reported that some of these plants give off substances that might help control nematodes, but the jury is still out on their usefulness for Alabama cotton production.

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* State of the crop as we look towards harvest. D Monks

This year’s cotton crop has had very good yield potential most of the season. The extensive rains that we had in June served to promote early growth and most fields that I have visited have had very good fruit set. However, hot, dry conditions in mid-July to early August have struck a major blow to our yield potential. Fields have been progressing rapidly due to the dry conditions and my feeling right now is that we will have a few fields in central and southern ready to defoliate by late August and certainly by early September. The rain that some areas are receiving this week (August 10) will likely result in additional flowers and small boll shed.

Is it too late for the rains to help this crop? It is a two-sided coin at this point. On the one hand, rain will help cotton fill and mature the bolls that are already on the plant. On the other hand, we will lose some of the potential that we might have harvested from the top crop. It generally takes 3 weeks for a square to develop into a bloom and 50 to 60 days for a late bloom to develop into an open boll. Applying this to our August 10 publication date, new squares today would bloom on September 1 and be open in late October or early November. That works on paper but the majority of the crop would be open and exposed to the environment for several weeks. This reduces both yield and overall
quality. Since we missed the tropical storms, the rain will likely help the overall crop.

The quality issues that we had a few years ago have not gone away but may have improved somewhat due to better growing conditions, better varieties, and improved harvesting conditions last year. Right now it appears that Georgia cotton producers are dealing with some major issues that have resulted in some mills intending to NOT buy Georgia cotton or to place some severe restrictions on it due to short fiber content. This was reported in the August issue of the Georgia Cotton Newsletter (for the full article, go to: www.griffin.peachnet.edu/caes/cotton). We still need to be diligent in our quest for high yields AND high quality through timely defoliation, harvest, and ginning. Environmental weathering, insect damage, and machine adjustments cannot be ignored as we go into another harvest season.

* Cotton market update. B. Goodman

USDA released its August Supply and Demand Report this morning. It contained shocking estimates of the US and world cotton crop, and prices are generally expected to suffer as a result.

USDA forecasts a near record 20.18 million bale US crop and an almost unbelievable 106.6 million bale world crop. The US production estimate represents an 11% increase over last year. USDA reports planted acreage up 1.32 million acres over last year, at 13.32 million, with yield at nearly unchanged, down only 3 pounds per acre at 727 pounds per acre. In the World Supply and Demand estimates, China alone is expected to produce over 30 million bales this crop year.

On the demand side, exports were raised slightly over last month, but are expected to lag 2 million bales behind the nearly 14 million bales exported last year. Domestic use is expected to further decline, falling from 6.3 million bales last year to 5.9 million bales in 04/05.

Our low beginning stocks (last year's ending stocks) of 3.6 million bales are expected to nearly double by this time next year to 5.9 million bales.

This news is about as bad as it can be. In a nutshell, we are forecast to be right back where we were 2 years ago, with chronic excessive stocks and perennial low prices. My prediction is that current US tropical weather in the Gulf of Mexico will have little impact on reducing the damage. I look for futures to trade sharply lower, possibly testing the 40 cent level by next week. If this estimate turns out to be correct, we could see 30 cent cotton by the end of the year. USDA rarely changes their estimates as radically as they have changed this one from the July estimate because the market reacts so strongly, but they have taken any prospective bulls out there by the horns this time, and we will see what the result will be.

I caution farmers to remember that as the AWP falls the LDP rises, so this news will only indirectly cause more damage. Farmers will receive an extra dollar in LDP for every dollar the market falls, so the net will be unchanged. However, USDA payments will
soar, wreaking havoc in Washington, where discussions shaping the new farm bill are already underway.

*2004 Cotton Calendar. D. Monks*

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Contact Person</th>
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<tr>
<td>August 17</td>
<td>South Alabama Precision Ag and Commodity Tour, WGREC, Headland</td>
<td>S. Norwood, W. Birdsong</td>
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<td>August TBA</td>
<td>Tuscaloosa Co. Cotton Tour, Tuscaloosa</td>
<td>Warren Griffith</td>
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<td>August 27</td>
<td>East Alabama Cotton Tour</td>
<td>Jeff Clary*, L. Kuykendall</td>
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*Retired county agent.

There are two websites that you may be interested in visiting:
Alabama cotton information: [www.alabamacotton.com](http://www.alabamacotton.com)

Reference Number: PSK-8-04, D. Monks and C. Burmester, editors

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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.

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