



Episode 13 —May Cotton Update

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Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama agriculture.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Hey everybody, welcome in to another episode of the Alabama Crops Report podcast. I'm Extension Entomologist Dr. Scott Graham.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

And I'm Dr. Amanda Scherer an Extension Plant Pathologist. We are excited to be releasing regularly scheduled podcast episodes with up-to-date information about Alabama crops throughout the year. You'll be hearing from Extension personnel from all over the state with the latest research and management recommendations. Hi Scott, how are you doing today?

Dr. Scott Graham:

I'm doing pretty good Amanda, how about you?

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Doing good, just starting to get busy as cotton is getting a start as well as peanut production.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah, as we're recording now in mid late May we've finally gotten some dry weather and sunshine, and finally able to get out and get some cotton planted. So with that today, we'll bring in our guest, is the first returning person on the podcast, Dr. Steve Brown, our Extension Cotton Agronomist. Steve, how's it going?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Going all right. Good to be with both of you this morning.

Dr. Scott Graham:

So [inaudible 00:01:09]. We've been pretty late. It's hard, I was talking to somebody the other day, unfortunately, for a lot of our trips to experiment stations across the state, we really don't get to ride around and see much row crop, which is kind of a bummer for us because we like looking at that. But do you have an idea of kind of what percent planted you think we are right now?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, we are late across the state. However, I think things they are in the process of changing, I'm sure farmers are going all out now to plant the crop, but USDA publishes a crop's progress report every Monday afternoon. And this past Monday, they said we were about 47% planted, I believe. The prior week [inaudible 00:01:55] maybe 42%, I believe is the number. The prior week they had said we were 27%. So at that point I thought that number was way high. I thought in particularly central and south Alabama, we might've been somewhere five, no more than 10%, or there's pockets maybe around Prattville where they had [inaudible 00:02:14] ahead of that, and certainly the Tennessee Valley was ahead of that.

Dr. Steve Brown:

But over the past week, I know we've gained a lot of ground and we may be getting somewhere close to that 40 to 50%. Normally this time of year at the benchmark they used of this past Monday, we're over 60% so we are behind. This week we're going to catch up a lot, but it's also beginning to dry out, there's no forecast for rain for the next 10 days or so. So, that's got us a little nervous on that end [inaudible 00:02:45] we've been too wet, we've been too cool [inaudible 00:02:47] now we're going to be getting too dry in some places or getting dry, I don't want to say to dry, because we really need to get the crop in the ground.

Dr. Scott Graham:

And that's as of May the 17th?

Dr. Steve Brown:

That as of May the 17th, and their number is probably published or presented on that prior [crosstalk 00:03:01] Sunday or [crosstalk 00:03:01] Sunday. But so that's what they look at year on, year out.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah. So Steve, I definitely imagine that with that recent bout of cool wet weather in some parts of the state that that's definitely held some producers back from planting this year. But what are some of the other factors as to why we've exactly gotten a bit of a late start?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, no question, it's been cool weather and wet weather. We maybe a window around the 25th of May where it opened, and we've been cool and wet and then it opened up, we planted a few days, maybe again, more so in Tennessee Valley verses some other parts, and then we simply had rain and more rain and even some big rains. I have talked to a couple of folks this morning who said, "Hey, they're going to be doing a lot of replant." And that's sort of discouraging because the weather that was cool turned out to be really cool and really wet and we've seen a lot of seedling disease and some cotton that may have suffered some chilling injury. And so it's a little hard call to make. And most years my thought is if in doubt, I leave it. This year, if some of the cotton's at this stage and I've seen that it's experienced some temperatures into the 40s and had two, three, four inches plus a rain, I may actually think the other way that when in doubt, I may replant some of this cotton that's just sitting there.

Dr. Steve Brown:

It's a hard call because it's expensive, we're behind already, but we may have experienced some more chilling injury than we think. And I'm not one who's seen a lot of chilling injury in my career, but it can happen, and it does. The crop just never is really thriving and productive like it should be.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Do you have any kind of a feel for how effective some burn downs were? I know in Prattville I was one of those people who jumped up a little earlier than I probably should have and planted some cotton for a [inaudible 00:04:56] that we have, and we really didn't get very good burn down and that's caused some issues for us as well.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, cover crops are a great thing in terms of soil management, soil health [crosstalk 00:05:07]...

Dr. Scott Graham:

Well, and these were even just winter weeds.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Okay. In winter weeds, in essence can be a cover crop because they're particularly dense and they can kind of be a curse because they can keep the soil cooler and wetter longer. And in certain situations, conversely, they can suck moisture out. So I haven't seen terrible situations on burn down, maybe with the exceptions of some [inaudible 00:05:35] evening primrose in some fields and that harbors some of your problems.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah, I was looking last week and it wasn't necessarily easy, but it wasn't hard to find spider mites on that primrose.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Okay.

Dr. Scott Graham:

For now I'm just thinking if we did have issues getting some low spots of fields or things like burned down and now we've got our cotton seedlings up and we come in and we finally kill that, well, if you look at the weather for the next 10 days, it's going to be hot, dry, and sunny, and we can see some issues where spider mites are going off of whatever we weren't able to get fully killed in the field and it may just be random spots in the field. So that's something to me. We need to be trying to watch those spots for spider mites over the next week or so because we have the potential for them to blow up.

Dr. Steve Brown:

This past Monday, or this was two days ago now, were planning a [inaudible 00:06:30] maybe a few miles from Auburn, this was a grower field and there was a cover there, and the cover had been [inaudible 00:06:3] radish and clover, I believe was what was there. And he'd done a good job of killing it, but it looked like we were flushing [inaudible 00:06:46] from grasshopper. So that's [crosstalk 00:06:48]-

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah, that's another one. Yeah.

Dr. Steve Brown:

... to keep our eye out for it.

Dr. Scott Graham:

And we're getting to the point in the season now where these grasshoppers have emerged over the last... Since early March, maybe even late April, and we're starting to see more and more of adults. And when we do, we might still consider putting in [inaudible 00:07:06] to control of the immatures, but that won't touch the adults. And we got to move to acephate to try to control those adult grasshoppers.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah. And just to add, as we record today, May 19th, temperatures are really starting to warm up around the state and things are definitely starting to dry out a little bit, as Steve and Scott have been talking about. In addition to the insect issues, are there any other things that growers should be thinking about, Steve, when they're planting under these current conditions and what concerns do you have?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, we have been wet and now we're clearly in a dry spell, which we needed for sure. And we've got a lot of wind and that's drying the surface off. And some of our lighter texture soils, we may be tempted to plant... In too extreme. We may be tempted to chase moisture and get a little deep, trying to get the seed in moisture. And that's a good thing, except some of our varieties have very fragile or a very weak seedling diggers, so I'd be a little careful planting a much more than a joint to my knuckle. So when I get much more than an inch and a quarter, I began to get a little nervous, if I got good seed and good moisture it's going to pop out of the ground but some of the seed that's a little smaller typically doesn't have right vigor.

Dr. Steve Brown:

In fact, we have a study where we've got one variety, a popular variety, and one lot had 5,800 seed per pound, another lot had 6,100 seed per pound, and the third one had something I've never seen before, it had 7,100 seed per pound. So I for sure wouldn't play at that 7,100... That latter seed very deep and go on to plant it in very good moisture. So that's certainly one thing we would think about is don't plant too deep, particularly with a weak seed.

Dr. Steve Brown:

The other thing is, I don't think we're in panic mode, but some people might want to dust in and that's going to put cotton in dry dirt and hope for when we get a rain that it's going to be sufficient to bring that crop up. That's a little risky and it's maybe a little early to take that risk, in my opinion, I'd want to plant it in moisture if I could. I know we're going to get pushed in terms of time and how long it takes us to plant the crop so we may see some people begin to dust in as well.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Just real quick while we were talking, I ran the thrips model and it's changed a little bit from what we're expecting. It looks like in north Alabama, cotton is planted now is kind of about a medium risk. Typically we think in central and south Alabama we get middle of May, we got a good chance to outrun the thrips, that does not appear to be the case now. It looks like it... I ran it Prattville, Edwin, and Fairhope, just the three kind of representative areas, and they were all a very dark red. If you're familiar with that thrips model at all, they were a 0.82 all the way to a one, which a one is the highest rating we can have. So it looks like if you plant your cotton from May 12th through May 19th, you're going to be in central and south Alabama, you're at a pretty high risk of thrips injury.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Which says to me, we've had a late enough start and we're pushed enough that we don't want to lose ground now. So if we don't have good thrips protection in seed or in furrow, let's be aggressive upfront when we get right to that first true leaf, we want to come over the top with something to deal with thrips. We don't want to back up now.

Dr. Scott Graham:

That's right. So Steve, I know sometimes we talk about don't plant more in a week than you can harvest and trying to manage the crop that way, are we kind of past that window would you say?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yes. If we were at the front of the planning season I'd say [inaudible 00:10:54] space it out over time, but we're past that kind of consideration. Now we've got limited time of optimum conditions for planting. So we've got to get it in the ground and get the crop going. I don't think we even consider harvest at this point, we want to just get the crop

in the ground up and growing, and we'll worry about the other later. We're running out of time calendar wise, favorable calendar wise so let's take advantage of it and get fully planted.

Dr. Scott Graham:

So kind of along those same lines, Steve, and we'll have time to talk about that this more as we get to that point later in the season, but we needed to start kind of changing our thought process for how we're going to manage this crop with it being planted a little bit later.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, probably, and particularly in central and south, we're going to plant more cotton than normal in the latter part of that window. So we probably do think about a change in strategy as we get into June and plant cotton into June. So we probably should make that thought process, or go through that thought process. One is we don't want to overseed, and I don't think there's a temptation for that [inaudible 00:12:04] expensive as seed, we don't want to plant too high population.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Second thing, maybe the most important thing is just don't be too aggressive with our nitrogen fertility. We might want to even cut back 20 to 25%, particularly as we get into June planting. So that would be, to me, one of the more important things. And then a third thing would be that we might be even a little more aggressive than normal with our PGR regimen. And I'm saying there are some varieties you want to be very careful on and you don't stop them. But many of our varieties are quite aggressive. And what being aggressive might mean is being a little earlier, rather than closer to first bloom, we might be somewhere maybe a few days after match head square and doing it earlier. Maybe the same rate, maybe bumping the rate up a little earlier, but that's going to hopefully help us manage the plant a little better, maybe encourage a little early fruit set. The data are mixed on that, but still, encourage early fruit set and limit vegetative matter in the field. So those would be three things that I would think about.

Dr. Steve Brown:

A fourth would be is if my growing season is compressed, I'll be real vigilant in terms of insect control. I want to be very active in scouting and I don't want to lose things to stink bugs and so forth. And we might even be a little more aggressive, and I hate to say this on, aphid control because aphids can stress the plant. And normally that doesn't affect yield or quality, but this might be a year if they really get heavy...

Dr. Scott Graham:

If we get a heavy infestation in the droughty period where it can slow the crop down, so we may want to...

Dr. Steve Brown:

That's right. We may pull the trigger earlier.

Dr. Scott Graham:

And I'll just note that I think you should always be vigilant whether you're planting early or they are not for your insects.

Dr. Steve Brown:

The stakes get higher if you've got a compressed season without the opportunity to recover from a square loss or a fruit loss.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Right and we'll ask you about price in a minute, but I know our prices are pretty good, which means we can afford to be a little bit more aggressive on our inset controls.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Correct, right.

Dr. Scott Graham:

But I did want to ask just for my... I'm just a old bug man, but you mentioned cutting back nitrogen, is that because early season growth is going to be a little bit quicker and we don't need it? Have we lost some yield potential so we don't want to put more into it?

Dr. Steve Brown:

No, I don't think anybody knows a yield potential. What you don't want is a dark green aggressively growing plant into late October.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah.

Dr. Steve Brown:

We really want that plant to fall off the cliff and began to decline and mature the crop, mature the bolls, et cetera. I'm going to say certainly by mid to late September or maybe even earlier than that, especially as we go north. So it's just that we won't... The plant will grow faster for sure, but we just don't need as much vegetation, and we don't need to sustain a vegetative growth and [inaudible 00:15:08] growth throughout the duration that we might normally need it.

Dr. Scott Graham:

But it's not a situation like corn where they know if you plant after X day, you're losing...

Dr. Steve Brown:

No, in fact, you don't know, and some years you may see June 2nd planted field, it might be the best yield and field compared to a May 10th, which you thought is ideal. So you just don't know because you don't know what's going to happen on the tail end in terms of weather. And I mean, how open the fall is, how warm it is, when's the first frost date, that sort of thing. When do we have a hurricane or a tropical storm event? So your heads in your bets and that's why you don't plan all your cotton on day because you do diversify somewhat by planting dates. But as you get later, you know that you've got a shorter time to do everything and to accomplish everything.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah, and just another thing to add too is you've talked about the more aggressive varieties as well as aphid pressure. From a disease standpoint probably the biggest thing I would be worried about, especially in the southern part of the state towards Gulf Coast, Fairhope, and Brewton, and that area is the cotton leafroll dwarf virus. We've seen in previous years where in the late planted cotton you tend to see the yield more effected by the virus in those cases. And that is transmitted by the cotton aphid. So that might be something that producers just want to keep an eye out going through this season and let us know if they've had an issue or seeing that when the cotton gets a little bit later on in the season.

Dr. Scott Graham:

And there's nothing we can do to manage that. We can't spray the aphids to stop it. So not necessarily something to keep you up at night or really even think about outside of, "Does my cotton look a little weird at the end of the year?"

Dr. Steve Brown:

And the research has been pretty good to show that it's a problem to be more alert to south [inaudible 00:17:04]. As you go north, we've seen less issues with it, Prattville and north, certainly into the Tennessee Valley. So yeah, that's something to be thinking about as well.

Dr. Scott Graham:

What are our prices looking like as of May the 19th?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Cotton price, I think today opened up over 150 points. So we're sort of trading in a range somewhere in the low 80s to about 87 cents. And when it has an eight in front of it, that's to me is a good thing. We've sold cotton, probably the average price on the 2020 crop was somewhere around 65 cents. Now some people say, "Well, hey, you can sell [inaudible 00:17:41]." But I'm just telling you average price because most of the crop was probably so far from 65 or 66 cents. And now we've got an eight in front of that. So to me, that's a very encouraging thing. We can get the crop in the ground, we keep hope alive.

Dr. Scott Graham:

Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah, so Scott mentioned that you were kind of our first returning guest. And so we had you on the first episode in February and Scott kind of put you on the spot a little bit and under the gun and asked you what you thought our cotton acreage was going to be for 2021. And you kind of thought that they would be around the 450,000 range, given the price strength at the time, which was hovering kind of around 85 to 90 cents, as well as the fertilizer prices. So we're going to ask you again and also put you under the gun, were you close to that range, or what are the current acreage looking like so far?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yeah, it's still up in the air. USDA is right in there at 450,000 acres, but the weather that we're experiencing now could have a negative effect on acres, in terms can we get the crop in. My thought is that's not going to be a big factor. So I think we'll be pretty close to what we were last year, which is again that 450,000 acre, or even a little bit down. And the reason we might be down is because, hey, it got so dry as we got into the latter part of May, we just ran out of moisture. But the prospects look good so I don't want to anticipate a dramatic change.

Dr. Steve Brown:

We certainly passed in most every part of the state, we've passed the window for corn planting and we can only plant so many peanuts. The other alternative is soybeans. And I'm a cotton man so I won't make any derogatory comments.

Dr. Scott Graham:

We on the Alabama Crops Report podcast support all row cropping in the state of Alabama.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Even though some of us have our favorites.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yes.

Dr. Scott Graham:

All right. Well, Steve, thank you very much. We really appreciate your time today. I think this will be a good episode for folks out and about across the state to kind of think about their upcoming cotton season.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah, we enjoyed it. Thanks, Steve.

Dr. Scott Graham:

All right, everybody. Well, thanks for listening. We appreciate you taking time out of your day to hear us talk. And as always, if we can ever be of any help, please let us know and be looking for another exciting episode of the Alabama Crops Report podcast.

Announcer:

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