Episode 23—August Cotton Update

Announcer:

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

Scott Graham:

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

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And I'm Katelyn Kesheimer and it's great to be back in the studio with you Scott, recording another episode.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, it is. So how's it going lately?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So we are here in the middle of August. It's still hot. We've got some rains from Fred, corn harvest in underway in the southern part of the state, looking good in some areas, some disease and the insect issues in other fields but overall I think we'll have a good crop by the time we finish harvesting over the next few weeks.

Scott Graham:

Yeah. Certainly had some good June rain and things to help fill that corn out. Now, like you said, it seemed like to me Fred probably didn't do what we had thought it might could have, at least when you look at the entire

state as a whole. So that's good. So hopefully we can avoid any other big things for the next couple weeks and get all this corn out.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah and one benefit of that too is it's helped reduce some sugar cane aphid populations in sorghum, in some late planted sorghum, helped bring in some of the beneficial fungus that takes care of pest insects. So I think it could have been a lot worse. So we got the lucky end of that storm.

Scott Graham:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Well, speaking of fungus, our guest today ... No we've got today, Dr. Steve Brown, our extension cotton agronomist. I guess the third time on the podcast, Steve?

Dr. Steve Brown:

I think that's right.

Scott Graham:

Fourth, you co-hosted one time too.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Oh, did I? Okay, well I'm just a bystander, listening to the corn discussion.

Scott Graham:

They may have to start paying you to be on it like they do us.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, we may have to get you out of the hot seat and onto this side of the room where the hosting duties are. But, yeah, we're excited to have you, Steve.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Good to be here and y'all are talking about Fred, well I was in some cotton yesterday afternoon and we are getting towards the middle to the late part of August but it was being irrigated yesterday. So as you move west and southwest in the state they didn't get much, if anything, from Fred. So they were needing some rain and again, supplying it by irrigation where they could.

Scott Graham:

Yeah. Yeah, I was telling somebody earlier this week that I could see why the week leading up to Fred getting here the meteorologists never wanted to say what it was going to do and you could see why because I mean, it seemed like it changing by the hour, that track, where it was going.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yeah. It looked like for a while it was coming up maybe on the eastern board of Alabama, then it almost was to maybe up by almost Mobile Bay and it shifted back and forth and wound up over where eastern part of the state got some rain and western got almost nothing from it.

Dr. Steve Brown:

We could have stood, most places would have appreciated maybe an inch or so but I know the Wiregrass probably got over four inches from it and that's a little much but still, if ... we needed some rain and we'll need some rain over the next few weeks as we try to finish the crops, at least cotton and peanuts, perhaps.

Scott Graham:

Well, before we get too busy into cotton talk we got to ask you what's your fun fact about Steve Brown?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Well, I guess I'm one of several Steve Browns.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah.

Dr. Steve Brown:

At Auburn University. When I was a student here I shared a class with Steve L. Brown, who became an entomologist.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Sure.

Dr. Steve Brown:

And when I went to and worked for the University of Georgia I lived on 1216 Murray Avenue and a year or two later Steve L. Brown moved to Tifton, Georgia and he moved to 1416 Murray Avenue. We still share mail and email sometimes. And there's a famous Steve Brown on campus who's a political science professor and I got some of his information and he, in fact, taught one of my sons here at Auburn and also at a summer camp at Stanford University. So he and I exchange information and emails and say, "I think this is yours." So that's about that.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So I guess for me one of the benefits of having a name that no one can pronounce like Kesheimer is that I am the only Kesheimer on campus, aside from my partner.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Right.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

But we are the only Kesheimers in the State of Alabama so I don't ever get confused with anybody else.

Dr. Steve Brown:

That's right.

Scott Graham:

It's the little things in life.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Right. Well, I'm excited to have you on here and talk about cotton and be part of this discussion because in another lifetime I was a cotton entomologist.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Okay.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Many, many years ago.

Dr. Steve Brown:

In Texas.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

In West Texas.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Okay.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

All right. So we've had a lot of rain, do we have rank cotton? What's the status of the cotton across the state right now?

Dr. Steve Brown:

We really have cotton all over the board. I'll back up and say USDA has stated through their sign-up, FSA sign-up program, that we have about 410,000 acres of cotton across the state. The previous two years we had 450,000, so that numbers off a little bit. We've got cotton that's fairly young and we've got, apparently, cotton beginning to open.

Dr. Steve Brown:

On the whole, we would say the crop is somewhat late, maybe two weeks late across the state, but the heat of August I think is going to push it ahead and we'll have people that want to see some rain, maybe the latter part or even into late September. Whereas, most of us would want to see the rain cease around the early to mid-September and begin to see the crop open and mature.

Dr. Steve Brown:

A lot of situations had excessive rain throughout in periods either June or July. In fact, I was at a place yesterday and they had 15 inches of rain in July and the fertility issues that that created is a frustration and you can see pale cotton. They actually even put on some extra fertilizer and it helped but a lot of places have been washed out like that and so you've got some prospects that have been diminished either because it's late or because it drowned or because the fertilizer has been leached out.

Dr. Steve Brown:

You got some other places where the crop actually looks spectacular and I looked at the futures, the December futures market, this morning opened at .9352 and last year the average price on cotton was around .65 so we're .25+ better than last year. Now we got to make a crop to sell a crop and I still have hope that we're going to have a decent crop as we average it all together.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Some places it will be great. Other places will be disappointing but I think on the whole I hope we're going to have an average to maybe above average crop. Again, as I say that, Alabama is so diverse there'll be places they'll say, "He's out of his mind. We got a terrible crop." And then other places, "Hey, we're sitting on something really good." So it's all over the board I think in terms of crop condition and prospects.

Scott Graham:

You mentioned some issues with pale cotton, yellow looking cotton because of, I'm guessing that's twofold. A, we've leached it out and B, the early season rains. We just didn't grow the root system really and so they really can't get down there to where it potentially could be or is.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Right. I think you got both issues. Like you said, leached and root growth. Root growth tends to slow as we get into reproductive stages where we flower and so root development may be such that as we stay in August and we get to 95 and high, extreme humidity that we've seen over the past couple weeks, it's going to stress the crop a little more than it might had we been a ... if we had a normal crop year.

Dr. Steve Brown:

So yeah, we've got pale cotton and some folks would be seeking to address that with some additional nitrogen. It's too late, in my opinion, for soil application but foliar applications of primarily foliar urea, feed grade urea. We can make an application of say 10 pounds and that delivers almost five pounds of actual in.

Dr. Steve Brown:

And so if we had some areas where we wanted to try to help it along maybe that's something we might do. In addition, where we've got aggressive growth, maybe in some bottoms, maybe we add and get aggressive with PGRs trying to help the crop finish.

Scott Graham:

And that was exactly where I was going with that is, do you think some of these fields could use a foliar nitrogen or something like that?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yes. Yes, definitely to help perk it up and foliar nitrogen does not contribute to rank growth. Hopefully, it's going to be absorbed and go to boll development. It's not going make for a rank plant. So that's a good way to address it if you think you might be deficient or might want to help the crop along.

Scott Graham:

So it's been a while since I've been in the classroom, thank goodness. Remind me, what's our most important nutrient right now for boll development?

Dr. Steve Brown:

It's probably, we got to say it's nitrogen.

Scott Graham:

Nitrogen.

Dr. Steve Brown:

We can put on some potassium and we've got some fields that are beginning to prematurely defoliate or at least to show some foliar disease symptoms that are actually secondary invaders because we've got, as potassium is drained from the leaf to fill the bolls those leaves become vulnerable. You see several fungi attack them. Stemphylium would be one, cercospora and maybe alternaria.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Those get on and they make the cotton look ugly and as the potassium is depleted in the leaf you can even lead to premature defoliation and you can cut yields as a result of that. So that's happening out there. So we could put nitrogen. We can put a little bit of potassium but there's so ... the foliar application of potassium you may give a couple pounds but that's a day or two's worth at most. Probably nitrogen is the product that we can most do something with at this stage of the game.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

You mentioned that a couple of the crops are about two weeks behind. Are there any special considerations that growers who have ... went in late because of the rains earlier in the summer, they need to take into account now as we're moving towards open boll?

Dr. Steve Brown:

Yeah. One of the approaches that they should have adjusted their program probably earlier than we're talking. They might should have had a ... if they have a target end rate let's say of 90 to 100 pounds, maybe if they were really late they probably should have backed off 10 or 15, maybe even 20 pounds, 20% of that. They should have done that earlier.

Dr. Steve Brown:

The other thing that would be to typically be more aggressive with PGRs and so that's something else we can do to help finish the crop. However, given the if it's dry land I think the heat and stress right now will tend to push the crop and promote maturation a little quicker than might ... we might have experienced in normal conditions.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, it seems like we really have not completely, but we've started catching up a little bit [crosstalk 00:11:11]-

Dr. Steve Brown:

I think you're right. I think you're right, yes. Yeah.

Scott Graham:

The heat and stuff has really helped the crop. One thing that you and I talked about earlier this year and I was listening to the Mississippi Crop Doctor's podcast yesterday. They had their cotton specialist, Brian Pieralisi on and they talked about it a little bit and I'm interested on your thoughts of a lot of this cotton that didn't start putting on squares until the sixth, seventh, eighth node this year, is that going to affect yield much, do you think?

Dr. Steve Brown:

I don't think so. In fact, I summarized, we have a field day later this week at the Wiregrass and I summarized, I got several experiments there and I said, "All right, what node did we see the first square?" And several experiments were over seven, 7.2 or 7.3. I had one that was 6.5. i don't think moving fruit, the first flower, or first node or first square, I don't think that's going to impact us.

Dr. Steve Brown:

It may delay us a little bit but I think once you get a significant crop, a crop of significant size, you can set a lot of fruit in a hurry and I think we can make a maximum crop on even four weeks of bloom. We still have some time to set some fruit if we need to. Some fields are winding up but we have time now still to make some cotton.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So Scott, you're pulling double duty today because I'm going to ask you a couple questions now about the insect situation in cotton. What's it look like right now and what have we seen the last couple weeks?

Scott Graham:

Well, there is no "normal" year and this year is no exception to that. So typically in Alabama when we think insect pests this time of the year, spider mites are always a concern statewide. But really we're primarily focused on plant bugs in North Alabama, in particular the Tennessee Valley and stink bugs really across the rest of the state.

Scott Graham:

And that's still, for the most part, the case this year but there has really been a lot of stink bug pressure in the Tennessee Valley this year and I don't know if it's because our corn planting was spread out and we're just continuously trickling these stink bugs in But my observations in fields that I've seen and some feedback that we've gotten from folks that are walking fields up there really a lot more stinkbugs in the Tennessee Valley than in a normal year.

Scott Graham:

Actually on the way in to record this morning I got a phone call from South Alabama, the Florida Panhandle, about this and it's not widespread. It's just in some localized areas but plant bug pressure is just unbelievable. They've sprayed four or five times for plant bugs and can't clean them up.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yikes.

Scott Graham:

Maybe in the Tennessee Valley that's something some folks have probably dealt with, certainly in the Mississippi Delta, the Mississippi River Delta, that's stuff those folks have dealt with, but in South Alabama that's really not very common.

Scott Graham:

There could be some things in that with could be, we need to make sure we're using the right tips, right gallonage, pressure, things like that and it sounds like those folks were but just really a very unique year. Now we do have some spider mites in some spots. Steve, you mentioned the rain and the Wiregrass and they probably didn't need four inches but there's several fields down there that had mites where you could start to see on field borders a little bit, even defoliation a little is starting to happen.

Scott Graham:

That rain really helped there. It's probably not going to get rid of the mites but it's certainly going to slow them down and beat them back and hopefully it'll help us get through the rest of the year now without issues with spider mites. But, that's a long winded answer there to-

Katelyn Kesheimer:

I was thinking in a year like this it's weird that we're having issues with spider mites, knowing how wet it's been, but I think you mentioned there might be some issues with application but I think sporadic, spotty rains can play a role too because I mean, if you treat a field and then go half a mile down the road you may get a pop-up shower and not even know about it and that may mess with your rainfastness. We've seen some failures because of the weather alone and so that may play a role.

Scott Graham:

And also, not getting great burn down in a lot of fields and being late to get in and finally kill these weeds because of all the rain. The mites are building in low populations there then they move to the cotton and then we get a 7, 10 day period where it gets hot and dry, boom.

Dr. Steve Brown:

I want to circle back and reiterate something you said, Scott. As we talk about late cotton one thing I would do is I would be extremely vigilant on stink bug control because if you have late cotton and it's the only green thing around and you got a lot of bolls or young bolls developing, stink bugs will find that and so if we have expectations of making a crop in a field like that we need to be very vigilant on stink bugs and not give a crop up to those bugs.

Scott Graham:

Yep, and as long as we're in that peak bloom of the third to sixth or so week of bloom our thresholds really low. It's just 10%. If you think about it, that's really not that many damaged bolls. As we get later it's still important that we do protect that top crop if we think we're going to harvest it but we can take 30, 40, 50% damage just because there's not as many bolls out there.

Scott Graham:

But like you said, these late planted fields, these fields that are staying green, they're really going to be green islands this year and these stink bugs are going ... you probably say hopefully they go to our soybeans but they're going to go into our cotton fields too and it's going to be important that we keep watching those bolls.

Scott Graham:

Stink bug prefers a young, 10 day or so old boll, but they can cause damage on a boll until it's 21, 24 days old. So it's really important that we stay vigilant late in the year and make sure we manage these stink bugs.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

I know scouting for stink bugs in corn is fun because they're sneaky. What's the best way to look at your cotton to see if you have stink bugs?

Scott Graham:

The best way is to actually just sample for the damage. So we're pulling bolls that are about an inch in diameter, popping them open looking for warts, stained lint. Sometimes you can just see a hole where it went through and if there's not a wart there yet it could just be it hasn't formed yet.

Scott Graham:

It could never be one but that's going to be an avenue for boll rot organisms to get into the boll and you lose yield that way. So very difficult, like you said, they're skittish, they can really ... trying to take a picture of them as us entomologists like to do, they can make you feel silly chasing them around a plant but they're hard to catch in a sweep net.

Scott Graham:

They're hard to find in a drop cloth because they hear you coming down the row and get out of the way. We always say basically if you're walking a field and you're just seeing stink bugs or if you do do a set of 25 sweeps and you catch a couple of stink bugs you're probably at threshold.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Sure.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Another aspect of this is usually around Labor Day we have fields, well should we keep going with this crop or not and if we've got a plant that has some potential but we don't have a lot of harvestable bolls yet, again, that's the field I'm going to make sure ... I may not make many more inputs but the one thing I am going to spend money on, if I have stink bugs I'm going to control them. So that's, again, that crop that you just say, well let's just see what happens in this field, don't totally neglect them but I still would be aggressive with stink bug management in those situations.

Scott Graham:

Well, I'm not a math guy. I'd like to put that on the record now. If we think about it, if we make a $6.00 application with .90 ... or $6.00 spray with .90 cotton we don't need to make but seven or eight pounds of cotton to preserve that, to make that money back.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Right.

Scott Graham:

So with the prices the way they are now we can really afford to be aggressive. Some years I feel like, and you can correct me, I feel like some years we need to chase money. Some years we can chase yield a little bit and this year with where prices are, we can really afford to chase yield.

Dr. Steve Brown:

That's correct. I'm with you. Yeah.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And one of the other benefits too is if you take out the stink bugs now that's less going into overwintering that are going remain in the system and especially you mentioned high numbers up in the Tennessee Valley, those are going to translate to high numbers in the 2022 crop. They'll go to corn, then they'll move to cotton and so the more we can take out now the better everyone wins.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, I think that does it for us for this episode. Steve Brown, Steve L. Brown. Nope, not Steve L. Brown.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Steve M.

Scott Graham:

Yeah.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Steve M. Brown, see I mean there's too many of you guys.

Scott Graham:

You just threw a hand signal at folks for what an [crosstalk 00:20:24] M looks like. She knows I'm from Mississippi.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, you're not a math guy. I'm clearly not a letter person. So, Steve, thanks you much and I imagine we'll have you back soon, once we start putting on harvest aids and picking that cotton.

Dr. Steve Brown:

Thank you, Katelyn and Scott.

Scott Graham:

Yep, thanks, Steve, and thank you all, our listeners. We appreciate y'all hopping on and visiting with us every week. As always, if any of us can ever do anything to help please don't hesitate to reach out and let us know.

Announcer:

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