



Season 3 Episode 2 – 2023 Cotton Outlook

March 10, 2023

Speaker 1:

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

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Hello and welcome into another episode of the Alabama Crops Report podcast. I'm your host, Katelyn Kesheimer.

Amanda Scherer:

And I'm your other host, Amanda Scherer. And, we're excited to be joined today by a returning guest, sometimes part-time host our cotton agronomist, Steve Brown. How are you doing today, Steve?

Steve Brown:

I'm doing well. How about you?

Amanda Scherer:

Fantastic. The sun is shining, it's warming up and we are getting ready to put some seeds in the grounds.

Steve Brown:

Beautiful day. And, it spring is coming it looks like.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Steve, we first kind of wanted to start with what were our final numbers for 2022 in terms of the cotton harvest? How did we do?

Steve Brown:

Actually, I think the numbers are continuing to roll, but they are dwindling. USDA has us at 938 pound per acre average. What was kind of mysterious, we started out maybe in June when they supposedly finalized acres. They finalized us right at 400,000 acres. When we got into harvest, they actually bumped those numbers at least twice and they say we wound up with 438,000 acres. And, that's going to bring our average yield down. If we stayed at that 400,000 acre mark in terms of harvested acres, that would put us around 960 pounds.

As it is, each week we're seeing fewer and fewer gen numbers and so we might not make 900 pounds an acre. So, we're somewhere in that range as we look back to 2022. What was really good for us is we got to mid-September and we had been experiencing several weeks of rain and overcast weather and we thought we were going to see just what we had observed in the previous seasons and been very disappointing in that we had a good crop and then we lost it to fall weather. But, around the 12th of September it quit raining and we really enjoyed weeks of very good weather for the crop to mature and for farmers to harvest. And, so we realized probably a better than expected yield, at least where we were in early September.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So, now that we kind of summed up 2022, what's the current outlook for 2023 and the current cotton price? And, I'll add that we're recording today, it's February 20th, 2023.

Steve Brown:

Recent reports have suggested across the US cotton acres are going to be down significantly. The numbers for Alabama are about 13% down in terms of acres for 2023. I don't think anybody knows at this point because the fluctuations in prices, market prices has somewhere around on December futures, which will be the 2023 crop mark, around 82 cents a pound. In recent weeks it's been trading more in the 85, 86 cents range. Last year's crop peaked out around a \$1.32 per pound and farmers are definitely hoping for that and are disappointed with where acres are. And, that probably reflects an overall increase in the US expectations this year, which are pegged somewhere around just under 11 and a half million acres, again significantly down over the previous year.

Amanda Scherer:

So Steve, as a non-cotton person on this episode, I know we've seen reductions in corn acreage the past year lot that was related to input prices and we had some tough weather, especially in north Alabama, so that may kind of reduce acreage even more. And, so if we're also seeing reduction in cotton acres, what are we planting?

Steve Brown:

That's a good question. Where are the acres going to go? I think the disappointments in corn last year I think will probably hold cotton acres up. Dry land conditions, especially in north Alabama, were disappointing and cotton probably did better than they thought at one time. In fact, some parts of the state, particularly the northeast part, they made a very, very good crop.

So, I know farmers will max out what they can plant in terms of peanut acres. Rotations will constrain them from going beyond that point. I think we'll plant cotton, we'll plant soybeans maybe more than we've seen in the recent past. Whether or not we're gun shy on corn, I don't know. But, input prices have retreated a little bit but not greatly. And, so farmers, it's tough on the farm with input prices increasing in so many different areas.

Amanda Scherer:

Sure, sure. So, with all that uncertainty and risk and price movement, what thing can growers do to really reduce their risk as we get going into planting season in terms of cotton decisions?

Steve Brown:

That's a tough question. I think we've paired down and paired back and trimmed and thought for so many years now, maybe we can always be a little more efficient and timing is always... We maximize the output from our inputs if we're on time with whatever we do. That requires ability, capacity, equipment, labor, and certainly labor is another ongoing challenge on the farm for everyone. So, I don't know that I have an easy answer in that regard, but the good producers that have the capacity are thinking no doubt about how to approach 2023 in all their commodities,

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Kind of continuing on that topic of reducing your risk, going into 2023, at least from a disease management standpoint, I always recommend producers really diversify variety selection on their farm. What kind of advice do you give producers when they're seeking out which varieties to choose to plant for 2023?

Steve Brown:

As we look at the landscape, there are a lot of competitive varieties. We don't have King Kong out there that really should take the market. We've seen errors when a specific variety dominated maybe 80 or 90% of the acres that that day is not with us currently. Farmers are making decisions based on technology. Probably the first decision they make is on herbicide technology. Of course you've got extend and you've got enlist. Under the extend umbrella, there's probably five brands and a single brand under the enlist. So, more of our acres definitely goes towards extend. And, so then they look at, as a university person, we always think about data and we think the decision should solely turn on data. That's probably not exactly right, but I'd encourage people to take a look at the yield data from Auburn University small plot, that's the OVT program as well as large scale own farm program.

Look at company data, listen for the coffee shop talk. Think about experiences on your own farm in your own neighborhood. And, what's floating towards the top? The one thing I like about the On Farm trial program

compared to say the OVT program, I think the OVT program is the best measure of agronomic potential, but the numbers of entry maybe exceed 30 or 40. And, so it's hard to sort through that. It's hard for me to sort through that. But, if you look at the own farm entries, there are about a dozen and so that probably represents the best of the best from the company perspective. And, so I look hard at those and say, "Hey, what are those do I like in terms of yield? What's merging towards the top there in terms of yield and fiber quality?"

And, that I would also make the point that, as you said, diversity, we probably don't want to put all our eggs in one basket. There is no one star that wins every time. I do think planting date because it takes us weeks. 2, 3, 4 weeks or five weeks even for some producers to plant the crop, calendar does give us some diversity. But still, I would say we need to plant multiple varieties on farm, whether that number's 3, 4, 5 or six, we need to be looking at multiple varieties in that mix.

And, then I'll say one other thing about that. We're always moving forward to new stuff and so I would devote a little bit of acres to look at new varieties to say, "Hey, what might be the star of the future? How do I approach management? How does it perform on my farm?" That sort of thing.

Amanda Scherer:

You mentioned technology and how important that can be in decision making. We've heard a lot about ThryvOn Cotton. Can you give us a quick recap of where we're at with the technology?

Steve Brown:

In the last couple of weeks, ThryvOn has received full international approval. So, they are proceeding with commercial introduction across the board to every producer this year. Supplies is limited, which is probably a good thing for us because it allow us to take a look at the technology before we jump whole hog. Clearly, and you can see this historically, when new technologies are introduced, they are rarely pushing the yield curve up and up. They do represent and improved pest management technology, but they don't immediately represent higher yields and better fiber quality. That's been the true dating back to the mid 1990s.

So, I think that gives producers, they shouldn't spend more to get less, but for thrips management, for plant boat control, this is a new tool for us that can really help us. I know you'll have Dr. Scott Graham on in a becoming issue of the podcast to talk about this in more detail, but again, I think it's a look see type year for us, to see how this might fit in our overall operation before we commit a lot of acres to it.

Amanda Scherer:

And, if people are curious, before we get Scott back on here to talk about it in more detail, there have been some articles from both you and Scott in the February Alabama Crops report newsletter and the Cotton Shorts newsletter.

Steve Brown:

That's right, those can be referenced online through the ACEs webpage. And, if you type Alabama Cotton Report newsletter or the Alabama Cotton Shorts, you'll find those issues readily.

Amanda Scherer:

And, before we leave ThryvOn, let's quickly talk about pest issues and how that factors into decision making right now for cotton growers.

Steve Brown:

I don't think farmers are overly concerned about pest issues, but as y'all have mentioned in recent podcasts, a warm winter and of course we were extremely cold at Christmas, but since then we've been rather warm. And, so that means we should maybe expect more pressure this year. I don't know that the tools we have represent pretty good options for dealing with worm pest, and so I don't know that that really tilts their thoughts. But, new tools particularly again, the thrips management, stink bugs continue to probably be the key pest. And, you'll talk about that more in coming months as we get into the season. But, warmer weather probably means more pressure for the year. So, let's brace ourselves and be ready.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

In terms of additional things that producers need to think about before planting, probably the biggest thing is seed quality. So, what are your thoughts on why that's so important? Why it matters?

Steve Brown:

Cotton is a challenging crop to establish. I had a mentor years ago said, "Anybody can plant cotton, but not everybody can get a stand." And, cotton is a much more fragile seed and seedling than perhaps soybeans, peanuts, or corn. And, so it's a little more tentative. We're a little more sensitive to moisture stress. We're more sensitive to depth of seeding and planting. And, so that quality matters in that regard because we want, when conditions are right, we want to be able to proceed with confidence that we plant the seed, we're going to get a stand.

The other part of this is if we go back a generation, just before we introduced the biotech realm, a bag of seed cost about \$35. Today with all the bells and whistle, a bag of cotton seed might cost \$750, we're getting close to \$800. So that's a 20 fold increase. And, so we're buying a more expensive product. We really need it to come up and to deliver all the technology that it brings. So, seed quality and stand establishment are always an important consideration in cotton.

Amanda Scherer:

I just want to clarify, so what's changed over the years?

Steve Brown:

Price has changed and we're also delivering incredible technologies that have a profound impact on our overall management. But, we're delivering it to the same old, not the same old seed, but to a seed that's carrying a lot of weight with it, if you might use that term. If you look at the overall cost of that seed, the seed itself might be 15% of the total bag costs. The rest of that's technology, but still that 15% has got to deliver the goods to get us a stand.

Amanda Scherer:

Got a lot of work to do.

Steve Brown:

Yes, that's right.

Amanda Scherer:

And, so let's talk about seeding rates.

Steve Brown:

The increase in cost have compelled, hey, we high low, can we go? And, there's been a lot of research over the past years. In the past three years I've had research in two southerly locations as well as in north Alabama. And, in the southerly locations, we really didn't see that seeding rate had an impact on yield. Now, that's not to encourage one seed per foot, but that should give confidence for producers to maybe look at two seed per foot as a standard and adjust upwards under adverse conditions if they know what's out there.

At Belmont, where we've done this study two years, we did see a trend that we needed a little higher seeding rates. And, the goal there is not to encourage those producers to look at two seed per foot, but maybe somewhere around three seed per foot or maybe a little less. We've got some folks planting three and a half, four seed per foot. If they could trim a little, they can save some costs as well with confidence that they're going to sustain overall yields. So, that's really the impetus for looking at seeding rate studies. How low can we go to get a consistent stand that will produce maximum optimum yields in our situation?

Amanda Scherer:

And, what if in 2022 we maybe had budgeted and purchased seed to go to that two or three seed per foot, but we ended up going with one or two. What can we do with that carryover seed?

Steve Brown:

Carryover seed is... We need to test that seed. If it's on the farm or maybe in distribution and they want to sell you last year's seed, you can test that with Alabama Department of Ag and Industries to see the germination on that. And, generally the seed quality numbers we're looking at would be warm germ and cool germ. Warm germ is by law is supposed to be 80% or better, and warm germ is determined at a constant favorable temperature for cotton growth and development, which is 86 degrees. Cool germ is more a measure of how well this seed is

going to do under stressful, marginal conditions and people, it's not the perfect number, but it gives an indication of how effective we might be in stand establishment on a marginal temperature.

That kind of test is conducted at a constant 64.4 degrees. And again, it reflects of, "Hey, if conditions are tough or we have crusted soils, cold weather, how well is that that crop going to come up?" So, we look at both of those numbers to think about seed quality, and if we know we're dealing with seed that's a little on the lower end of that quality spectrum, we might want to be cautious about trimming too much. We might want to go even bump it up a little bit.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Now that we've kind of talked about seeding rates and variety selection, let's kind of swing back a little bit to variety selection. Probably a big increase in the last couple years in questions has been about nematode management in cotton. So, just for our listeners, we have two main nematodes that affect cotton in Alabama.

We have the reniform nematode and then the root knot nematode. And, the root knot nematode we find more often in South Alabama in that kind of sandier soil, the reniform nematode isn't as restricted to soil type, but it kind of prefers more of that silty soil. Steve, in your experience, how have you seen some of those nematode resistance varieties perform on the farm and in some research trials?

Steve Brown:

Under heavy pressure, they are a great answer for us as we try to grow cotton in those sites. We can use nematicide and they temporarily knock back populations, but they don't really address the long term issue of the presence of nematodes. But, the resistant varieties can perform well under heavy pressure and actually reduce reproduction and maybe even reduce overall growth and the future population of that nematode.

So, I think they're very valuable for us where we have those pressure and we need to identify where nematodes exist because they may not be the highest yielding varieties in the absence of those, but they do represent a great tool for us to address nematodes.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, sometimes I encourage producers to kind of look at it as a non-host crop when you're going in with the nematode resistant variety. It may not always be top of the line outperforming everything in terms of yield, but it's more of an investment in the future crops that you have to reduce that pressure going forward. And, there's several different varieties that are commercially available. They're not all created equal. There's some that just have resistance to root knot nematodes. There's some that have resistance to both.

I definitely recommend producers utilize soil testing to kind of identify what nematodes they have in their fields. Right now we've passed the window where you can really do soil sampling. That's more in the fall, so if you're wondering what's going on and what your pressure is going into the season, just keep a close eye out for just overall plant stress and you suspect nematodes then this coming fall, that would be when you would sample.

Steve Brown:

Yeah, I like using the resistant varieties where we have significant problems because like you mentioned in terms of rotational crops like maybe peanuts and cotton are a great rotation because the pests, the soil nematodes that affect peanuts don't affect cotton and vice versa. So, the resistant varieties can do the same for us in terms of reducing pressure in the long term.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

I think we presented a great wealth of information to our listeners today. Do you have any parting thoughts or words of wisdom for 2023?

Steve Brown:

Let's talk again sometime soon.

Amanda Scherer:

Oh, I know you'll be back very soon. Well, thanks so much to our guest, Steve Brown. And, as always to our listeners, if we can be of any assistance, please don't hesitate to reach out. And, thanks for listening to the Alabama Crops Report podcast.

Speaker 1:

The Alabama Crops Report podcast is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and is sponsored by Alabama Ag Credit.