



Season 4 Episode 6 — 2024 Crops Recap for Central Alabama

December 11, 2024

Announcer

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama Agriculture.

Scott Graham

Hey, everybody, welcome into the Alabama Crop Report podcast. Got a good group. Today we're going to talk about just kind of what happened this past year 2024 across central Alabama. Scott Graham, Simer here as always. Good to see you.

Simer Virk

Yeah. Good to see you, Scott.

Scott Graham

And we've got our recurring guest, Blake Lanton. West central Alabama regional extension agent and first-time guest Christy Hicks Good to have you back here with the extension and the podcast room with us.

Christy Hicks

Yeah. Good to be here. It's been a fun three months, so I'm happy to be back.

Scott Graham

It's just been three months. It seems like it's been longer than that. But my life right now is, is very slow and fast with two, two under three year olds at home and, long nights and fast days, calm doesn't exist.

Simer Virk

Gosh, I thought you started, like, earlier than that this year.

Christy Hicks

Yes, indeed.

Blake Lanton

I guess since I've been talking to her for the past couple of years that I just feel like she just walked right in. So I don't even do this.

Scott Graham

Well, what happened in central Alabama this year in a row? Crops. Look what we want to talk about.

Blake Lanton

Well, the main thing was drought. And, yesterday, the Alabama Department of AG, came out with their designation of three disaster counties Dallas, Perry and Wilcox. So those of those counties will be available for some kind of assistance. It's best to go to your local USDA service center. Get some details about that. Also, the nine counties surrounding Dallas, Perry and Wilcox are in that list. Bill, Butler, Chilton, Clark, Hale, Lowndes, Marengo and Monroe will be added in that list of who can get some assistance for this past year of losses.

Scott Graham

And so just for our listeners, Blake, yesterday is December the 2nd was when that was announced.

Blake Lanton

Sure. We're in the first week of December as well.

Scott Graham

Yeah. Well my point is we don't know when this will be posted. Yeah. We're not fully over control of all that, but yeah. So that early, early December.

Simer Virk

Is there a time limit on when the growers should go and do all that usually, or.

Blake Lanton

I don't think I haven't seen a deadline on that. I would, you know, I'd get in there as soon as possible. I'm assuming most of this is going to be in the form of a loan to get you through. So when or if we do get some assistance, it'll at least carry you over. So, you know, you can get going in next year.

Scott Graham

Yeah. It's drought. Drought was bad across all of central Alabama. Not just west central.

Simer Virk

Yeah. Do you have any counties that are part of that too?

Blake Lanton

Togo would be one of her counties. Yeah.

Scott Graham

So it was those first three counties you listed and then adjoining counties. Yes.

Blake Lanton

This is Dallas, Perry and Wilcox and any, contiguous counties touching those counties. Oh, okay.

Scott Graham

And contiguous is the big word for the day.

Blake Lanton

It's on this piece of paper right here.

Blake Lanton

But, yeah, go to your local FSA, USDA office and get a little more information on that.

Simer Virk

Okay. So, Christy, we had Blake earlier, second episode, I guess, provided us the crop update from west central Alabama, I guess. What's the crops update from your region.

Christy Hicks

East central Alabama, I will say had two extremes. We had the majority of the people were surprised on the good side with their cotton yields. I've talked to several guys that, you know, they're like, hey, it ended up being a little bit more than we thought, which is always positive. But we did have some pockets, especially on the extreme east side of the state, that they struggled, they stayed in a drought.

Christy Hicks

And, of course, peanut yields, cotton yields, they all struggled. But like I say, we did have some bright spots. There were some guys that, you know, just right in the picture with them and talking to them, hey, this is the

best cotton we've had in 3 or 4 years. They did not have rain when the cotton started opening, so a lot less boll rot than we would normally have.

Christy Hicks

We had a little bit of CBR in some peanuts over in the extreme east side of the state. It occurred late in the season. So we don't think, you know, it wasn't widespread. It was just kind of one spot that was kind of an anomaly. And so, we did have that a little bit of to have spotted.

Christy Hicks

We'll, but I think the big thing this year for me was just how bad nematodes were. I mean, they showed up, obviously in some cotton here in east central Bama, but the southwest part of the state, they had soybean fields and peanut fields that were, it was just a visual, you know, bad situation. And obviously, whenever the yields come in, you know, that was kind of a rough situation there.

Christy Hicks

But I'd say overall, you know, a lot of years, like this, we have a mixed bag, we have some really good yields and then we have some that obviously we're in drought pockets and struggled.

Scott Graham

Yeah, plenty. Day probably played a pretty big role in that too you know. Yeah we talked about blight. But if you were starting if you were at peak bloom in July in central Alabama, you probably came out okay. If you're planted later and you're just getting into bloom then and you're peaking August, you're in trouble.

Christy Hicks

Yeah, yeah, I agree with that.

Blake Lanton

Well, yeah. Like she said, you know, we were able to get that bottom crop. I think we talked about that on my first podcast, but I actually talked to a grower the other day and he called me, said, guess what? I yielded. And I was like, I don't, you know, I really don't even know 750, 800 pounds.

Blake Lanton

I don't think he knew about knocked it out of the park. He said 900 across the board. So I think the biggest thing is, people are surprised with what they've gotten, at least with their cotton, because we were able to get in the field earlier this year and get going. So maybe a lot of these folks won't have to go to this disaster program, but I'd use it as a tool if I had to.

Simer Virk

Yeah, yeah. Nematodes was kind of our big issue here. What are some of the strategies for that?

Christy Hicks

So I actually reached out to Dr. Lawrence just because she's done tons of research. And nematodes and, you know, she kind of told us that. Look, it's going to have to be, approaches like an APM approach. You're gonna have to look at crop rotation. She. Yeah. I mean, that to me is your number one no brainer decision is go ahead and look at a variety.

Christy Hicks

This resistant root-knot, you know, there's soybean varieties or cotton varieties that do have resistance. So that's going to be your number one line of defense. Also doing crop rotations we like to use rotation. But prices obviously drive a lot of that. Also you can use some cover crops. So anything that increases organic matter in the soil is going to help you with your nematodes, because basically the natural enemies of nematodes feed off of organic matter.

Christy Hicks

So as with anything, organic matter is the answer. We can't really have a magic bullet down here to get a lot of organic matter, but there are cover crops such as raw. There's a few more, that are really good to plant to help decrease. Obviously you got no matter solids and things like that, but, you know, just as far as rotation, choosing the right variety, if you can plant cover crops, obviously tillage can help break up that cycle, but also that'll spread the nematodes throughout the field.

Christy Hicks

So it's kind of a double edged sword there.

Scott Graham

But I think about the thing about crop rotation too, is kind of like insecticides. And if I go from about Fenton to Lambda, they're both pyrethroids. And so if you rotate to a host, then you're not really doing anything. So you need to make sure you're rotating to a non-host crop.

Christy Hicks

Yep.

Scott Graham

To break that cycle.

Christy Hicks

That's exactly right. And something else you know you got to think about weeds in the field. A lot of times how you might have a resistant variety out there. But if you don't control your weeds they can also be a source of food for them. So it's just a way to keep them in the field. So weed control is also a big thing to do.

Blake Lanton

And that's kind of what I was worried about. You know, after everybody mowed their cotton stocks this year, the amount of regrowth we had, well, that's still something that never could never toads can still feed on. So I will say that as much as I don't like it, this cold weather may kind of help us in those situations because it's at least, you know, killing those plants all the way to the root where there's nothing out there for them to feed on.

Scott Graham

And, and Christy was getting into these issues this year was do you think part of it was it was dry when they were sampling soil sampling last year and just didn't realize they had the populations they had, or maybe a lot of these fields weren't sampled for nematodes or.

Christy Hicks

Just the ones I've been in a lot of them didn't realize they had is high population. Yeah, we sampled, but it's been a few years and obviously in the pockets I looked at in southwest Alabama, they had been through a drought. The plants already stressed. You know, the root systems already compromised. So that kind of, made the situation worse.

Christy Hicks

Whereas, you know, you had a moist spring, which is good for a nematode to build populations and stuff like that. You go through a drought. So I think it was, hey, we know we got nematodes. We just didn't know the populations were this high. Yeah. And they were off the chart, In that area.

Simer Virk

So what's our protocol for? I'm kind of more familiar on the precision soil sampling side, but for nematode sampling on a field, how do you how many samples and how do you decide? And what's the kind of the recommendation there?

Blake Lanton

That's a good question. I mean, the best would be your precision sampling. I mean, back in the day, before when I was pulling soil samples, that it would just kind of the way the old school maps ran. So just depending on whatever.

Simer Virk

At least you want to capture a soil type. Yeah, yeah. Sample separately within the field, right?

Christy Hicks

Yeah. And, kind of the way we were pulling in the field because obviously the soybeans were still growing. So we would go to kind of the age where the plants were done and we would get, you know, you want to make sure you're in the root zone. And I like pulling kind of close to the root. I mean, that's worst case scenario because that's where the most nematodes are going to be.

Christy Hicks

But we would pull right there on the edge where the plants, you know, they're still alive, but the plants kind of six inches away were dead. And, you know, pull out in the area where the plants look better. And pretty much every time you would see it with a lower population where the plants were still healthy, but, you know, where the plants are already done.

Christy Hicks

I mean, that's where it was a hot spot. So that's the thing about root, not nematodes. You're not going to see them widespread throughout the field. It's normally going to be in localized spots in the area, the plants.

Simer Virk

That's where I remember Bob Kemerait. Right. Always kind of troubleshooting says you are oh as many good samples as many bad to kind of really know what's happening. So don't just get a sample where they are, also sample where they're not coming in though.

Blake Lanton

And do you remember what was there a nematode variety in our peanut trials this year or.

Christy Hicks

Is it Florida 52.

Blake Lanton

It?

Christy Hicks

Maybe we might need to check that, but it was doing well in the, variety trials that, you know, I've seen, so that's hopeful. Getting a good peanut variety that does well across the board, that's resistant. And, Scott, I was blowing up your phone with spider mites. Might call. So we had spider mites and peanuts even after an inch, right?

Scott Graham

Yeah.

Christy Hicks

So that was another thing to me that took me a little bit by surprise.

Scott Graham

I got more spider mite calls on peanuts in that got into September, didn't it?

Blake Lanton

It was late.

Scott Graham

Like late August through September. Then I'd gotten peanut calls. Period in my career. Yeah, how should I what is happening here? Because like you said, I mean, in September we started getting right again and it was like it didn't matter.

Christy Hicks

No, it didn't. And I was like, do we dig? Do we spray? What do we do?

Simer Virk

And I'm like.

Scott Graham

What do we do? Well it depends. Yeah.

Simer Virk

Is it so if you recommend something at that point, it's just it mixes with the fungicide tank or does it need a separate application?

Scott Graham

No. Yeah. You can. Yeah. But you know, there is some, some thought out there that the amount of fungicides that we spray in peanuts reduces the needs of these fungi for fungus that kill spider mites. And so it's possible that in, in peanut fields or even in our peanut areas where there's more a higher percentage of peanuts in the landscape than all of our other crops or whatever, that just landscape wise, you're reducing that, that natural fungus, which can make a margin cotton, too, because most of my spider mite calls are from the Wiregrass or they're from peanut producing areas.

Scott Graham

And so that's something we I think there's some old literature from the, you know, 70s or 80s on that and something we probably could try to look at now and try to quantify for Alabama. But that I think that plays a role in it.

Christy Hicks

Yeah, that's a good point because I was looking at some crop acreage and like you say, southwest Alabama. There, half cotton and half peanut, 50-50 down, down the line. It's just as many cotton acres as it is peanut acres in that area. And I mean, they were extremely bad.

Scott Graham

Yeah. And, you know, peanuts are at 170 to 180,000 acres. But when you're making 5 or 6 fungicide sprays on it, now that's over a million acres, right? That's yeah, that's a lot.

Christy Hicks

It's a good way to think about it.

Scott Graham

Yeah, yeah. And so it, I hear feedback from some of our industry friends about frustrations with their companies not seeing peanuts as important because it's such a small, small acreage crop when you compare it to other crops. But we always talk about when you look at how many fungicide sprays you make, that's actually a pretty big acreage crop in the southeast.

Scott Graham

And so I think that plays a role in spider mites in, in the wiregrass or southwest Alabama, either one. Yeah.

Simer Virk

Yeah. Blight. What's, what's changed since you were here last? On your, in your region crop wise or anything new or most anything new?

Blake Lanton

Well, I can't say I learned too much, but most everybody's pickers are under the barn now. I think, I'd probably say 85, 90% of the acres are, are done with. So I've seen several people planted cover crops past month, few weeks.

Scott Graham

Yeah. I was going to ask how this planning is going right now, or are people able to get into the field? I know it's been too dry for a while there.

Blake Lanton

Yeah, that's why everybody's lighter than they would like to be in this. The biggest reason it was too dry and they were kind of wondering what kind of money they were going to bring in before they spent money on cover crops. I have, I have seen some that were, at least planted close to on time, but most everything would have been ruined by as is just now, coming up or, you know, hasn't been long, out of the ground.

Simer Virk

How much percent adoption of cover crops is in your region, or has it increased even yours?

Blake Lanton

It's year to year. There's a lot of farmers that do it that don't do it across the board. There's some farmers that do it this year, may not do it next year. And then there's some farmers that do it, you know, every single year. Most of them, are planting wheat. I think this year there's some guys planted oats.

Blake Lanton

I do know of one farmer. Dallas County. This planting more of a three way mixes. But that's, I would say few and far between. I don't hear many people try to plant a makes.

Scott Graham

And the wheat will be a crop. No. Not just.

Blake Lanton

Well, some of them will harvest some of their wheat, but no, most of it is.

Scott Graham

Just it's.

Blake Lanton

Just a cover. Yeah. Just cover.

Scott Graham

Well, similar for you, Christy.

Christy Hicks

Yeah, I think there's actually been more adoption, in the past few years. And I think in my area we're pretty heavy on rye. We just, you know, rye seems to do really well for folks as a cover crop. And I think, you know, a lot of weed control, that it provides is kind of a decision because, you know, we're kind of in the limbo sometimes with, what we can spray over from what we can.

Christy Hicks

So I think, cover crops have proven themselves that they do help, but I think we probably could do a little bit more education around the equipment it takes to manage a cover crop, especially plant into it. With my area being heavy cotton. I mean, it's so important to get a cotton stand-up. And sometimes, you know, you kind of second guess yourself planting cotton into a cover crop.

Christy Hicks

If you've never done that before or had a bad experience or something like that. But I think there's a lot of value in cover crops and people see that. So I would say that acres as far as cover crops are increasing in the area. Yeah. It's been pretty good adoption.

Blake Lanton

Yeah. And I'm kind of with you about the education about it, you know, some of them preach biomass, some of them, you know, just preach putting something out there for a little bit of erosion control and, and water holding capacity. And then, you know, some people, you know, when you get that mat out there, the soil stays cooler.

Blake Lanton

So when you've got a lot of acres and you need to start early when temperatures are right, bare dirt, you know, that's kind of a downfall that some people don't want to deal with. But, I've been looking into it and there's a YouTube video that I actually sent Christy yesterday, of some farmers in North Carolina that have done it in the way, the way they have done it, I think is a lot more beneficial than just throw in a mono-crop out there, just the grass species that people generally plant.

Blake Lanton

And I get it because it's cheap and it does serve a purpose. But you know, anything that and I'm not a big soil health person, but you know, if we can if we can build a little bit of that organic matter or, or plant a legume

that's going to put a little bit of nitrogen in the ground, you know, I think back when, when cover crops were first getting pushed, folks thought they were going to see an immediate return, and that wasn't the case.

Blake Lanton

And a lot of people got burned because they went and spent a lot of money putting them out there and didn't wait for that growth. You, your, your biggest return, you know, usually not going to come to a year three, 4 or 5. And still some years you're going to wish you didn't do it. But most of our area, what 80, 90, 95% of our acreage is dry land.

Blake Lanton

So the way the guys in North Carolina talked about it is we're planting these cover crops for that June and July drought, you know, so that we can we can utilize those March and April rains and hold it in the soil so that we can make it through, you know, like what we've seen the past two years where we didn't get any water.

Blake Lanton

Well, there's water in the soil and you plant salt in that, kind of acts like a, you know, strip till that that roots can actually penetrate the soil and get down to reach that moisture. You can start seeing your benefits, but it's not going to be, you know, a planet. And the next season we're going to, you know, see great results and better yields and everything else is.

Scott Graham

Probably just going to see more bug problems the next.

Blake Lanton

Year. Well, I think.

Christy Hicks

Business, but, and I totally agree with Blake. In a previous role I had, we were looking at, you know, some research as far as, cover crops and fertility in this, in that. And the biggest thing that increases yield is organic

matter. Too bad we don't sell that in the can nowadays. Right? But organic matter is the biggest thing you can do to help your yield and build long term sustainability at your farm.

Blake Lanton

Well, that and then, you know, going back to nematodes, knowing what species are a non-host or I'm trying to find the word deterrent comes to mind. But that's not it. But suppression maybe. There you go. You know there are certain cover crops that can suppress nematodes. And if you can plant that in the winter, going in, to your next spring, that can hold those off.

Blake Lanton

That's just another part of your program, and you're killing multiple birds with, you know.

Simer Virk

Yeah. I mean, it would probably be good to have Audrey sometime. Yeah. Come share some information on cover crops.

Blake Lanton

Yeah. And actually, she, she and, somebody else, we actually have a publication that gives you a list of cover crop species, winter and, summer that tells you how good they suppress them with, along with other things. It tells you, you know, excellent to pore on, erosion control. Excellent. The poor, water holding capacity, root zone growth and nematode suppression and, I need to find.

Blake Lanton

That is really interesting.

Scott Graham

I had a graduate student with Kathy Lawrence, Claire Slover, who is at Wisconsin now. But she was on a project looking at organic sweet potato production. And so part of what we had was all these different cover crops, you know, by themselves and mixtures and how we could use that to reduce nematode numbers. I won't say what a single one of those were right now because, yeah.

Scott Graham

Well, I for the most part.

Christy Hicks

I haven't been on somebody about that. And brassicas, mustards, radish and rye are kind of the ones that stick out. And two, we were thinking in South Alabama sunhemp are really good. So you might have a long enough growing season in South Alabama that signing up could be in the mix if you get your corn off or something like that, you know.

Blake Lanton

Well, even a lot of those guys in South Alabama, you know, have got cows. And that's what I was showing. One of the growers I used to work with in South Georgia, he had pretty much quit growing cotton and was growing only peanuts. So he was letting some land lay out every year. And when I showed him that he was, don't hold me to this, but I won't say it was sorghum.

Blake Lanton

Sudan was one of your bigger suppressors. And he's like, well, you know, I could plant that on my bare dirt or fallow ground in the summer, get a wrapper and, bale it for silage and use it for cows. And I'm not just letting land sit there. Yeah. You know, I'm getting some kind of money off of it, and he had a bad, root.

Blake Lanton

Not only is the problem with peanuts. So that's what he was, you know, looking at doing, he passed away about a year later, so we never got to do it, so. But there's something that I'd like. I'd like looking at,

Simer Virk

You guys have also have meetings planned for this?

Blake Lanton

Yeah. So we've got.

Simer Virk

You want to share some information with us?

Blake Lanton

Several production meetings coming up. Again, this is recorded in the first week of December. So these meetings, most of these won't start till the middle of January, but I'll have a grain production meeting on February 19th at the Black Belt Research Station and another cotton production meeting. And somewhere in Dallas County, it'll be somewhere in Selma. Have it, I haven't locked down a location yet.

Blake Lanton

Then Christy and I will also have a row crops meeting in Talladega on February the 11th. And then I'll let you go.

Christy Hicks

Yeah, that'll be a cotton meeting. So we'll kind of focus on cotton there. But, January 28th over at the EV Smith Research Center. That'll be, crop production meeting. Also February 6th down in Atmore and Row crops still will hit at Atmore in the morning for lunch. And then Row crops still that evening, February 11th, while Blake mentioned in Talladega.

Christy Hicks

And we'll have Calhoun County that morning. And don't forget about the spray drone. Ned-user conference down in mobile. And that's going to be March the 23rd through the 26th. So that's kind of the upcoming, dates that, you know, we'll be offering, road crop production meetings.

Simer Virk

There's going to be, I know, spreader, conference Steve's probably going to have a website all that separately to go down the extension, but you're going to have all the on the extension somewhere. Yeah.

Blake Lanton

So that's what I was about to say. So, on the website, there's a calendar. Most all of these will be put into that calendar. But if you want to get on your own, an email list with any of your regional extension agents so that we can send you fliers directly to email, text, whatever, go to the ACS website to the directory.

Blake Lanton

You know, you can type in our names, which gives you our cell phone numbers, email addresses, office numbers, anything. Just shoot somebody a text, email, or anything, and tell them you want to be on our list. And, you know, when these production meetings are.

Scott Graham

Along the lines of our meetings. And this is not just true for y'all's regions, but everywhere, I think we will try to shake them up a little bit. Right. We've talked about that. And yeah. Well maybe.

Blake Lanton

Try to stop boring.

Scott Graham

Maybe. I wouldn't say that out loud, but maybe try to get away from the traditional PowerPoint standup and, and. Yeah, for 15, 20 minutes. And then here comes the next one. And we're hoping to be able to have a discussion with the people out in the room. Right. because we want to answer your problems, not what we think your problems are.

Blake Lanton

Are, but we want to hear from y'all. And y'all just quit, you know, sitting there listening to us ramble.

Simer Virk

Well, I think about.

Blake Lanton

This is.

Simer Virk

Something kind of very similar format. We don't have agenda here. We start on hey, what the crop look like this year and that gives us enough to get into, well, what happened? What causes what can we do about it. Right.

Blake Lanton

Yeah. What have you seen, what issues. You know, challenges are you facing? What can we do to look at those challenges and try and figure something out with you? You know, anybody that wants to, you know, look at varieties, have a variety trial on your farm, you know, reach out to your extension agent. Well, you know, do our best to see what we can do for you.

Blake Lanton

But these production meetings, I think the best ones have been, you know, no PowerPoint. Sit there, talk. Let the growers speak amongst each other to, you know, see what? Somebody's 30 miles the road is doing a little different. That can help them. You know, that's sometimes the best thing because trial and error from them, you know, can benefit them.

Blake Lanton

You know, more than, than some of the research that goes on.

Scott Graham

Yeah.

Blake Lanton

So, yeah, more informal roundtable turn-row talks. That's what we'd like to do this year with production meetings. We just really want more, you know, face to face one on one. Let's talk and see what's going on.

Scott Graham

All right. Well, anything else we need to talk about or cover? Y'all think before we get out of here.

Simer Virk

Got all your points covered, Christy.

Christy Hicks

I think so. I appreciate you guys. Thanks for letting me be a part.

Scott Graham

Yeah. Thank you all for coming. Enjoyed it. So, as always, I appreciate our listeners. And if y'all have any topics or conversations you'd like to hear or if you want to be a part of it, don't please let us know. We'd be glad to, talk about anything with anyone. Maybe within reach in any way. Right.

Scott Graham

And if any of us can ever do anything to help in extension, please don't hesitate to reach out and let us know.

Announcer

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