



Season 5 Episode 12 — Crop Talk: Alabama Field Conditions

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Announcer

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

Scott Graham

Hey, everybody, welcome into the Alabama Props Report podcast. We're in the roaming studios today. We're actually at the Tennessee Valley Research and Extension Center in Belle Mina, Alabama. Got a good bit of the cotton team here. We just finished up our third, scout school of the year at Belle Mina and thought it might be a good time to sit down and talk.

Scott Graham

So, we got a room full of folks, Scott and Simer, Ron and Eddie, and then Cade and Blake. So, guys, appreciate your efforts today with the scout school and your presentations and the conversations we have with folks. And, thought maybe, Simer, we talk a little bit about North Alabama and what the situation is, across, I guess, West and East Alabama.

Simer Virk

Yeah. Since we have Cade and Eddie both together here and we feel like it has definitely been a different year, especially for North Alabama. So, it'd be a good, good way to get us updated and even talk about some of the crop outlook or situation going on this year.

Scott Graham

So what? Eddie, won't you give us a round up? We'll go East to West.

Eddie McGriff

Well, right now it's surprising that we have some pretty good-looking corn. Any time you have a lot of rainfall, and we were able to plant corn earlier before all the rains in May. So right now, corn sit at silking. Or at least the earlier planted corn is at silking. Right now, farmers are concerned about putting the fungicide on.

Eddie McGriff

So, we have a lot of fungicides going out, which makes sense if you have all the rain that we're still having as we look right now, this week looks like there's going to be some more rain. I had a farmer call me up Monday, and his real concerned about, not planting anymore soybeans. He said, you know, this week we're probably not going to be able to plant soybeans because all of the rain in northeast Alabama, he happened to be in Cherokee County.

Eddie McGriff

And I said, well, you know, you need to do what's best for you if you can take preventative planting. I would go ahead and do that because it is going to start getting a little risky when we get into late June, it's a little bit harder to make a good soybean yield. And right now, I would say that we have about 40% of our, cotton crop planted.

Eddie McGriff

So, in a lot of that is late planted. And I've looked at a lot of cotton and there's a lot of drowned out how spots also. So, it's been a really tough year. And, I think it's going to be, a really unusual year also.

Scott Graham

So what do you think you said about fungicide applications in corn? It's not something I know a lot about. Do you think a year like this might be more likely to return on that? Or.

Eddie McGriff

Well, I think it's likely to put a return on it even in most years, because I know that most plant physiologists or pathologists will say that you don't get a return from corn unless there's disease out there. But I would argue with that, because what we've seen is the ability when you put a fungicide on, you get tremendously better standability.

Eddie McGriff

So when you are at harvest, and the farmer has to get off this combine 15 or 20 times in a day because,

Simer Virk

Morning Glory.

Eddie McGriff

Yeah, yeah, the corn stalks are falling down. He has to clean his head out. Well, it'd be worth it putting the fungicide, just not having to do that. But I'll give one example. We were doing a, when I first started doing fungicide trials.

Eddie McGriff

I was only able to split a field with the plane. Right now, my fungicide trials are with a drone, and we're able to do some rep tape trials. But the farmer said, look at this Eddie. And he said, where we didn't put the fungicide, he held up the stocks. They just crumbled in my hand, he said. We went over where we did put the fungicide.

Eddie McGriff

He said, I can't even break this corn stock here. So that sold him on a fungicide. So, I would say, now we don't have that much disease in North Alabama. We have some northern corn leaf blight and gray leaf spot. And normally that's a minor pest. And then sometimes we have southern corn rust come in, in late, and then that definitely would pay with the fungicide with it.

Eddie McGriff

Well, I'd say our value with a fungicide is twofold is standability. We also put a pyrethroid in it that knocked down some of the stinkbug pressure. So, you not only get a benefit from reducing stinkbugs in corn, but you're also reducing the pressure as a leave that you get towards brown silk if they're not going into soybeans, or even the plant bugs that we have in corn are not going to cotton.

Eddie McGriff

So, you you're knocking down some that pest that would go into your cotton or your soybeans.

Simer Virk

Eddie do you have any numbers on what the how much rain you have gotten since end of April, May 1st or something like that?

Eddie McGriff

We did, but we've got anywhere from, 12 to 15in in May and, I looked at one. We got rain 20 out of, 31 days.

Simer Virk

Wow.

Eddie McGriff

In May. So, it's not only that we're getting a lot of rain. We're getting a lot of rain days, which, you know, it's spaced out, which makes it hard.

Eddie McGriff

When I turned in my survey for, days that we were able to, to work in the last two weeks of May, I have one day in each. That was all we were able to have field work.

Simer Virk

That's what I was thinking.

Eddie McGriff

One day in a week.

Simer Virk

A couple weeks ago, some my colleagues, especially, there's one economist in K-State, and he has some calculators and stuff. But every year he kind of takes some data and all that. And we were like how many true planting days we had in the planting window. And I was just warning about this, even for some of our trials because we couldn't get them in.

Simer Virk

I'm like, man, it would be a really good idea to really know. Out of the two, two and a half months we had to plant corn, cotton, peanuts, all that. How many actual real days we really have in different parts of the state.

Scott Graham

I think they've changed their reporting now. But the weekly crop progress report used to give, you know, days you could work in the field. And so,

Eddie McGriff

It still does.

Scott Graham

Even the new format they just rolled out?

Eddie McGriff

Well, when I fill it out, I try to fill it out each week. They still have that. They have, the last question they ask, how many days were you able to,

Simer Virk

To get out in the field.

Eddie McGriff

Yeah to get out there or had field work. Yeah. So that in the last two weeks of May I, I can only put one day for those last, so 14 days, we only had two days suitable for field work.

Scott Graham

Yeah, yeah. So that would be interesting to go back and look at that.

Blake Lanton

So, so up in your area as far as corn goes do most people have plenty of storage to store and dry all their corn. Or do they go straight to the,

Eddie McGriff

We have a tremendous amount of storage up and in my area, but there's not enough to store the whole crop. We do have farmers that, say we're here in Limestone County, but Henderson Farms, they have a tremendous amount of storage and they just put in another huge bin so they can see value to storing corn.

Eddie McGriff

When the prices or the basically when their basis gets better. So, we don't have enough storage to store all of our corn, but we have a tremendous amount of storage up here, at least in Northeast Alabama, which might be different in Northwest.

Cade Grace

It depends on how close you are to an elevator. You know, the closer you are to Decatur or some of these chicken mills and then, you know, you miss truck corn, pretty much, you know, and you don't have bins. But if the corn is planted in Northwest Alabama, especially the, you know, the Northwest part of the Tennessee Valley materializes, and we have, average to above average crop yield.

Cade Grace

We're going to have a lot of corn on our hands come this fall. And that could be a bottleneck sitting in the line at some of these elevators, but I was just looking at some rainfall data where I've got a soybean plot over in Colbert County. They've got almost 47in of rain this year.

Simer Virk

Wow.

Scott Graham

What's the yearly average?

Cade Grace

Like 55, 60.

Blake Lanton

And they're almost there.

Cade Grace

We're June 17th, we're at 47in. But the plot here since April 1st we've had 25in and I know I loaded and unloaded my truck four times with the seed in the backs and the generators trying to go the next day to plant plot in the fifth time it worked. So I'm glad we finally got it in.

Cade Grace

But it was, you know, over in June, so we probably won't have an optimal yield from that plot. But you, you look at it and I gave this data to Halle, and it rained 21 out of 31 days at that plot in May.

Simer Virk

Wow.

Cade Grace

Very tough to get to get anything done. I mean, it rained 21 days that month.

Cade Grace

And in April, we had 12.5in of rain. I mean, one week it rained 8 inches.

Simer Virk

So, I know our cotton got affected a lot, but were the corn, also got corn planting, also got affected significantly in North Alabama.

Eddie McGriff

There's a lot of late planted corn, seed corn, everything from brown silk to knee high. Right now.

Simer Virk

Well, the field here. I think the corn is like at V3.

(Everyone)

Yeah.

Scott Graham

Well, there's a, you know, farm commercial field a block away from us, basically. And, one side of the road, Blake, it was just starting to silk and on the other side of the road, it was, thigh high.

Blake Lanton

Maybe V10, V11.

Scott Graham

Yeah. So, it's just all over the board. And that may have been, I don't know, they changed. What? Maybe they were going to plant cotton and went back to corn because the prices, I don't know some of that may have happened.

Blake Lanton

Well, the reason I was asking about the storage... So, you know, when I was in South Georgia and we were actually scouting corn, you know, the guys that didn't have the bin space, we may not put a fungicide on all of it because, you know, putting fungicide on it takes longer to dry down. And I didn't know if y'all would consider that kind of recommendation.

Blake Lanton

You know, we were more worried about a hurricane coming and blowing it down, to, you know, having to wait on them to dry down. I didn't know if, having so much corn in the landscape this year, if you would even let that be a determining factor.

Eddie McGriff

No, because our farmers, you know, when I was working with Randy Dathing, you know, when I was down there in South Georgia. At one time, he held the world record for both corn and soybeans. But I noticed one thing. When Randy harvested his corn, it looked like his field corn looked like silage. It was dark green. So, I have a lot of our high, our high yield growers, they want their corn to be as healthy and as green as they can at harvest.

Blake Lanton

So, yeah, you're saying you can overcome the dry end cost with the yield.

Eddie McGriff

Well, I mean.... Yeah. There's also a phantom yield gain. So, the higher the moisture your harvest of corn is at, the phantom yield gain or what they call a phantom yield gain is, usually offsets the, the price of the LP gas to drive down. So we've done some work with Stanley Walters down in your area and we have harvested at three different moistures. And it paid to harvest at a higher moisture even when you factor in the cost of the LP gas, even though the corn's that black layer, it's still respiring and using energy and using that energy takes yield away from the corn.

Simer Virk

I know we're talking about storage and all that. I think I learned something cool when we were at that extension specialist meeting here in Marshall County. That poultry industry is so big in North Alabama that all the grain production from Alabama or North Alabama, it can take it in just one week.

Blake Lanton

Yep.

Simer Virk

And that's why they import everything else from the Midwest or other. And that's why storage is even more important because they were saying the growers who have who can store grain on their farms are able to get a better price if they hold on and sell when all that other traffic kind of gets out of the way, and then they're able to give it to the sellers, the poultry houses and stuff.

Eddie McGriff

Yeah.

Eddie McGriff

If the Mississippi River is low and they can't bring corn down here in the mills and eat it. I mean their basis is got to go up. I mean I've heard a dollar and a half

Simer Virk

Someone told me...

Eddie McGriff

A dollar and a half per bushel.

Simer Virk

Yeah. That's what.

Eddie McGriff

If the corn supply is tight because they're going to have to have that corn to run those mills to feed the chickens.

Simer Virk

I thought that it was interesting that our grain productions.

Scott Graham

Is enough for one week.

Simer Virk

Enough for one week for the mills to last and all that, and then we're dependent on others. So, yeah.

Cade Grace

And we're in a grain deficit state here. And that's it's pretty crazy to think about as many chickens as we have north of Birmingham, Alabama, and we don't have enough grain. I think even if you took the whole state and all the grain we grow, it's maybe two weeks. So, we get 50 weeks out of the year.

Cade Grace

We've got to get grain, you know, on rail or by barge. And,

Simer Virk

I think that barge we were visiting that's where they mentioned the barge company who moved the barges and all that marine something. Their imports are usually 23 million tons every year, and their exports are about only 3 million.

Cade Grace

I saw a cool statistic last week. I think, I guess somebody through USDA put it out, of your average basis on soybeans, and corn in the United States, and a good thing for Alabama growers, we usually have the highest base positive basis for grain in the whole United States because of our poultry here. So, we're very thankful to have that.

Cade Grace

And there's a lot of cattle up in this part of the world, too. So that's, that's something to be proud of, not having to holler grain and get a negative, take a negative basis on it. So yeah. Helps to have we have, you know, that Bunge and Cargill that, crush facilities. And then we've got all these other chicken mills.

Cade Grace

So thankful for that. Especially if it looks like the most corn we probably planted here since, what, 2013-14. It's probably been about ten years. A lot of corn out there of all stages.

Simer Virk

Alright. Well, what about our cotton this year?

Eddie McGriff

So yeah. Yeah, this is going to be a very short crop because I've surveyed the gins in my area, Cherokee and Blount County, and we basically planted about 40% of a crop but not only is it 40% a crop, that doesn't include the yield loss we're going to have by planting late.

Simer Virk

Late planting.

Eddie McGriff

And then also how much of that that crop that we have planted has drowned out.

Eddie McGriff

And there just could be areas that maybe you're only going to be able to harvest 85 or 90% of the field, in some cases, not even that much.

Simer Virk

So, where's the other 60% going in?

Eddie McGriff

Well, it's either going to go in preventive planting, which nothing's going to be planted on it, or it's going to go into late soybeans.

Blake Lanton

And when would you stop playing soybeans up here?

Eddie McGriff

Well, we can still make some sort of a yield up until the end of June, but, you know, when you get past June the 15th, it gets dicey whether you can get a return on the yield that you could make in with, late planted June soybeans. So, it's, you know, a lot of people just want to have a crop on their field so they can control the weeds.

Ron Smith

But the late planted soybeans, your moisture requirement would be based for the month of August there when the pods are filling. It seemed like to me that would be real critical where you have moisture or not. As far as yield goes.

Eddie McGriff

Well, it's good things that farmers can't control the rainfall, then because the late planted soybean farmers would want it, and the farmers that the cotton was opening, they they wouldn't want it because of boll rot and hard lock.

Ron Smith

Well, some of this early planted corn may be harvested in August, so they may be needing to harvest corn.

Eddie McGriff

Yeah.

Ron Smith

But the beans need rain on them. So, it's going to be a strange year all the way through.

Eddie McGriff

Yeah.

Simer Virk

Cade, how much cotton acreage in your part of the state?

Cade Grace

It look like acreage before planting was probably going to be down 30 or 40%. And from one of the folks I've talked to, farmers and ginners, some gins are down 50 or 60%, some may be a little more. Talked to one guy this morning, and he said they're probably going to have 75% of what they thought they would plant, and that's probably the best I've heard.

Cade Grace

So that's 20, 25%. That wasn't planned. So, I hope that that's more of the norm then not, but it's going to be interesting to see what, the USDA comes out and says, planted acres, you know, next month. So, it'll be interesting. It's probably going to be the lowest amount of cotton acres we've had up here in a very long time.

Cade Grace

I don't know how long, but there's, you know, on your red heels and your higher ground, you know, you've got some good stands of cotton, and it's young, but, you know, there's a lot of bottom ground. That has went to preventive plant or either late soybeans. And so, it seems to, I mean, it's really just the most land I've ever seen left out.

Cade Grace

Yeah and that's disheartening. We needed, needed a good spring to kind of rebound from the drought of last year, but, but what's there, you know, hopefully with aggressive PGR management and, you know, good IPM measures, you know, we can make the best crop we can possibly make. But I have seen some good, good looking cotton on some higher ground.

Ron Smith

And I think there was a small one in late April. Yes. And it's the farmers that really got out and, and, pushed it into that window, cotton is looking pretty good up here now.

Simer Virk

Is that, can it be called early plant cotton here or is that normal?

Ron Smith

It's the early side depending on. But I should may talk about around April the 20th or something like that. And actually with some the red soils in Tennessee Valley, they do get warm enough to plant cotton, at that time, even though the nights may still be cold, they can actually the soil temperatures is warm enough to plant.

Scott Graham

You know, there's a big dichotomy. South Alabama in particular wants to be a little bit later to avoid boll rot. You know, we feel like around Labor Day we're going to be running into problems. Hadn't seemed to be a problem appears much at least that week. And so north Alabama you're more concerned about an early frost.

Scott Graham

So, they're trying to get it in earlier just to avoid that.

Simer Virk

I was just, April thinking. Because I know when I was in South Georgia, they were like, we're not getting any cotton before May 1st

Scott Graham

Right, yeah.

Simer Virk

Or even the first week of May.

Ron Smith

Traditionally the Valley up here. Can you check that? But traditionally, they'll plant some, 20th of April on is their planting window. So, they'll go about ten days earlier than rest of the state if conditions are right.

(Everyone)

Yeah.

Simer Virk

As a reference, since we got Blake, how much the weather affected yours in the central region, but how much planted acres you'd think. How much percent or do you get? The growers were able to get all their cotton in.

Blake Lanton

So, around the Selma area and east, most folks are either done or pretty close to being done. Once you get over in the black belt. Honestly, I hate to say it, but that's just conversations that I haven't really wanted to have with some people. The ones I have talked to have replanted two and three times, and the last one I was talking to, they were on their third replant, and I'm pretty sure some of that probably got drowned out too. I did hear of some wheat that, they were pretty much told "don't bring anymore, it's not marketable."

Blake Lanton

So, you know, they were planning on planting cotton or beans behind that wheat. And haven't even gotten it out of the field. I would guesstimate 60%, maybe 70% has gotten planted, some of the bigger farmers I know we're still way behind. Once they can get in the field, they can get in the field and cover ground, but it already takes long enough in the black belt to dry out.

Blake Lanton

You know, I really hate to say it, but I don't have a good grasp of the situation over there. It's conversations that I've kind of pick and choose which ones I wanted to have it with, people that I knew were always happy go lucky, you know, that's what I told somebody the other day...

Blake Lanton

I could call and he might be fishing, you know, I don't I don't mean to ruin his day if he's, you know, trying not to think about it.

Simer Virk

(Laughs)

Ron Smith

Simer, let me jump back just a second. I had a real unique experience. I always remembered talking about planting up here in Tennessee Valley. Early in my career, I was up here one time, and it was late April, and it was spitting snow and the planters were running wide open.

Ron Smith

Now, it turned out it was a nice day the next day. So, it was kind of an initial cold front just moving through. But anyway, that's something I'll never forget to see a snowflake drifting through and the planters running.

(Everyone laughs)

Simer Virk

So what? What other, I guess any considerations and things for growers to consider where we are at in the season right now for North Alabama especially.

Eddie McGriff

What's that?

Simer Virk

Any recommendations or anything how to navigate the rest of the season from an extension perspective.

Eddie McGriff

I would just say do everything you can to promote earliness on your cotton, you know, control your plant bugs. Be timely with your picks. Try not to use harsh herbicides if you can help it. I think anything we can do now to promote earliness and that goes for soybeans, you know, look at, for planting now in late June, they need to increase their seeding rate, narrow the rows as much as possible.

Eddie McGriff

Of course, there's equipment limitations for them, but the narrower your rows, the better off you are planting late and then control your insects.

Cade Grace

Yeah, Same thing I talked to a grower a couple of days ago he still planting beans and he has a 30-inch planter. And he said, "So, should I go back on my middles and plant them and split my rate. Put them on 15's?" and I said, "Yeah, you know you're going to get some taller beans out of that are you know, more prevalent to cut."

Cade Grace

So, I think there's some folks that have a, you know, a 30-inch planter that will do that or if they got access to a drill on seven and a half's tens probably do that. Raising that seeding rate up 150,000 seeds plus per acre, I guess y'all can tell me if that's is kind of what we've been telling folks to do.

Cade Grace

You know, you could get away with, with cut back earlier, but now, probably not. And you also wonder you know what, how much of this, you know, low spots or water is going to get part of my stand. And if you're going out there putting out 110,000 to begin with and you're already backing up. So yeah, you got a little bit an increased seeding cost.

Cade Grace

But, at this point in time, we've just got to do the best we can to get a good, good, viable stand out there and kind of like Eddie says on the cotton, you know? Pay attention to, you know, your PGR in aero growth, you know, make sure is getting scouted and you're taking care of the insects in a timely manner.

Cade Grace

And you know, using harsh herbicides, you know, a lot of folks will use cockle soybeans coming in with, with reflex or prefixing, you know, you're going to get some rosin, and some burn there when maybe we can just use an if they're stem flex, use some liberty instead. If we can clean it up with that, you know, that might be a safer method to not set those beans back.

Cade Grace

So yeah, just a wild year. Just get crops at different stages all over the place. It just doesn't seem like the whole region has had to together cumulatively good weeks to be able to run. You might be in Franklin County, and you had a good 3 or 4 days, but down in Fayette County you didn't have any days.

Cade Grace

And it's just where have you been? Where is the rain hit or not hit? But overall, it's just been tough to string together good sets of, dry days to run. But we'll see what the forecast has in store.

Blake Lanton

And real quick, I will make this point because we talked about how much corn is in the landscape and how less cotton. And so, we're thinking about, you know, we're talking about the plant bugs getting diluted when there's a lot of cotton, there's a lot less for deer to eat right now. A lot of fields that I've not had deer pressure in this year are already getting hammered.

Blake Lanton

So, I'd be on top of my deer if I've got problems.

Scott Graham

Were we not doom and gloom enough before, Blake?

Blake Lanton

I'm trying to prepare everybody for the war. I mean, you know, you better tend what you got because what you got right now is probably all you've got.

Scott Graham

Yeah.

Blake Lanton

You know.

Simer Virk

So, there will be more deer in the field. This year.

Blake Lanton

There is a potential, like I said you're going to have two fallow fields to, you know, two fields where they were spread out across all four.

Scott Graham

Yeah.

Blake Lanton

Well now they only got two fields to eat in, so what are they going to do?

Scott Graham

They're all, yeah.

Simer Virk

That's a good point.

Ron Smith

And I'm glad he mentioned. Cade, I'm glad you mentioned the Fayette County area. We haven't really thought much about, but several significant farmers, that part of the state we've talked about north, west, northeast and the Black Belt. But I think what we call west Alabama has been just as bad as the rest of it. We just haven't had a lot of feedback.

Ron Smith

I know, I had a call from, Lamar County a week or so ago, and it was a terrible start over there, too. So those several counties have got some significant farms. They were in the struggle.

(Everyone)

Yeah.

Cade Grace

Yeah. 14, 15in of rain in May over there. Probably worst in the plot. I haven't called. Can you go south of there, Marion? You know, down around Hamil. Really? South Red Bay, going into Hamilton, down to, Vernon, Fayette, down Tuscaloosa County. They were more around that 15 inch mark in May. And there's a good bit, a bit of cotton growers down there who, are very committed to the to the cotton game.

Cade Grace

And it's just been a rough go and even on into, Mississippi. You go into that part of the black belt over there, Knox, and Lowndes over in there. And it's the same, same way. Just a lot of a lot of water on a lot of good, good bottom ground. It's just, just tough.

Cade Grace

You know, last year we were talking about wish we had pivots and irrigation. Every field this year we wish we had it tiled and had drainage ditches pulled. But, you know, each year brings a new, a new way of trying to think how to mitigate risk and it's just been a tough one.

Scott Graham

The only other thing I can say to add to what's been said is just manage a crop for what it is. Right? You know, this late planting stuff is not going to have the same potential as early planting stuff. And I'm not saying don't address problems. Don't I'm not saying don't put anything in it, but just keep in mind with everything you do, it needs to make a return.

Scott Graham

And we can't manage 800-pound cotton like we do 1,200 pound cotton or, you know, 80 bushel bags, like 30 bushel beans. So just keep that in mind, address problems, but manage it for what it is, because, you know, you can only push it so far.

Ron Smith

Yeah. Let me just say that we've had reports today from plant bugs moving in to, not quite a threshold. But moving into some of the oldest cotton over the Cherokee County area. So that's just a forerunner of what we've been suspecting is going to happen. They're going to concentrate in the oldest planted cotton. Initially.

Scott Graham

Yeah.

Scott Graham

All right. Guys, we appreciate your taking some time this afternoon to, record and again, with your help with the scout school that we recorded today here at Tennessee Valley. Appreciate everybody that came and all our listeners, if anybody has any, any way any of us, Alabama extension can ever help in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out and let us know.

Scott Graham

And we'll be back with another episode soon.

Announcer

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.