



## Burns Flat Oklahoma Cooperative

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Burns Flat, Ok. -- Recent crop failures in Oklahoma's wheat country has farmers looking for ways to get good yields and put money in their bank accounts.

While seeking to increase their cotton ginning business, a young farm cooperative manager and his board of directors found one way to solve the puzzle.

Ryan Sawatsky, 30, manages the Burns Flat Cooperative Assn. Following two years of record cotton crops in 2004 and 2005, he embarked on a daring project to expand the gin's customer services.



But along the way, they, like a lot of other farmers, had to fight one of the worst droughts in history.

"We only ginned 300 bales in 2003," Ryan said. "In 2004, we ginned 800 bales and in 2005, we ginned 1,650 bales. Realizing cotton growing was entering a new era with the eradication of the boll weevil, we decided we would find a way to increase cotton acreage in our service area and also try to double the number of bales we ginned in 2005.

"While out trying to find cotton acres, I kept running into people whose cotton equipment was outdated; who didn't have the capability to harvest a crop," he said. "So, we asked them, 'If you could get it done with high dollar nice equipment and get it done in a timely way, would you be interested?' "

Ryan was trying to find enough farmers who would each commit to growing 100 to 150 acres so they could add another 1,200 acres of cotton to their core service area which covers a 10 to 15 mile radius around Burns Flat, he said.

"While we were shooting for 1,200 acres, we would up with about 20 farmers committing themselves to 3,000 acres of cotton," he said. "If it hadn't been for the drought, we probably would have had as much as 4,000 acres planted."

They also found their service area had increased to a 25 mile radius around Burns Flat with the increase in cotton acreage.

What Ryan and his board of directors did was form another organization, "OK Cooperative Farms," a custom farming program for the Burns Flat Cooperative customers to share in.

"We can do all of it, the kill jobs, fertilizer before planting, planting, over the top applications and harvesting," Ryan said. "We invested, or are investing, in a tractor, 12 row planter, sprayer rig, stripper and module truck."

Along with the equipment, they decided to stick to no-till to take advantages of its advantages of moisture retention, improving tilth of the soil, reduction of water and wind erosion and all of the reasons for using this practice, he said.

"We finally put the program together in Feb., 2005, and we had to work hard to get all of the cotton planted," he said. "I believe using no-till saved us from having to abandon more of the cotton we planted. All of it is dryland and most of the land was put into no-till for the first time. But out of the 3,000 acres we planted, we only had to abandon 300 acres. We recently looked at the 2,700 acres we saved and I think our yields will range from 300 to 800 pounds of lint per acre."

They also planted 1,000 acres of milo as well as the cotton, he said.

They planted both stripper and picker cotton varieties, he said. All of the varieties are Roundup Ready and around 70 percent has the Bollgard gene as well. "We planted only a little Flex cotton, around 10 percent of it, but I can see us going to 50 percent of the planted acres being Flex cotton in 2007," he said.

OK Cooperative Farms is already trading in some of their farming equipment, Ryan said. "There is a lot of interest in going to 30 inch rows instead of 40 inch for planting next spring," he said. "We are also expecting to receive a stripper and boll buggy any day for harvesting this fall."

Ryan has been manager of the Burns Flay Cooperative for four years. With an accounting degree from Southwestern Oklahoma State University at Weatherford, Ok., he worked for a certified public accountant firm for two years before starting work at Burns Flat. Now living with his wife and five-month-old daughter near Foss Lake,

Ryan is a native of Arapaho, Ok. An older brother, Rodney Sawatsky, is the manager of the Midwest Farmers Inc. Cooperative at Clinton, Ok., 20 miles north on I-40.

"We are enthusiastic about the future of cotton production in this area," Ryan said. "With all of its new production qualities, growing cotton is entirely new to us. When we were out talking to our customers to see if they would like work with us, we found some who had quit growing cotton 15 or 20 years ago and others who had never grown it. We think the new cotton varieties, new equipment that is used and continuing to build our soil with no-till will be what we need to use in rotation with wheat and milo. The cotton will kill out weeds now growing where wheat has been grown continuously and it will be a money-making crop we can add to the crops we grow here."

