



Don't Count Cotton Out Yet, says Oklahoma producer Bob Collins October 24, 2008



Too many people are discounting cotton as a bigtime contributor to US agriculture crop production, according to Bob Collins, a lifelong cotton producer and executive-level worker in Oklahoma and national cotton production organizations. Walking through a field of his cotton, he points out Oklahoma and other South Plains states will harvest a high-quality, top-producing cotton crop this year; in spite of horrendous weather problems that took out millions of cotton acres in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. NTOK Cotton photo.

by Vic Schoonover
NTOK Cotton

FREDERICK, Ok., Oct. 20, 2008--Bob Collins knows cotton and cotton people. He has lived in the cradle of Oklahoma cotton production, Tillman County, almost all of his life.

He grew up in Custer County, a place where dry weather and farmers with brows furrowed by worry go hand in hand.

So, like a lot of other people active in dryland farming, he is realistic when he talks farming and agriculture production.

"Cotton farming is taking a lot of hits today," he says. "It is not just the recent weather with the Texas hurricanes and plains rainstorms that took out more than a million acres in that state and Kansas, there is a lot of pessimism from economists and others who are sold on the promise of high prices and acreages for biofuel production."

Collins, who recently retired as the executive director of the Oklahoma Cotton Council, also was executive secretary of the Cooperative Cotton Ginner of Oklahoma until it and several other Sooner State cotton organizations became the present Council.

Harvey Schroeder, Frederick, Ok., cotton producer, currently serves as executive director of the Council.

So, while some say nations like India and China will become future leaders in world cotton production and others say world trade organizations have been effective in hamstringing the US as an effective cotton marketing country, Collins, an oldtimer in the fray, says, "Don't count cotton out yet. Not by a long shot."

"Everyone now knows the most effective areas in the US, maybe the world, for growing cotton, particularly dryland cotton, are the southern plains states of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. For many reasons, and in spite of all the bad weather, more cotton acres will be harvested in these three states than in the rest of the country this year," he said.

Why this is true, he said, is that new, transgenic cotton varieties have built-in improvements in resistance to dry weather and to attacks from many diseases and insects originally feared by cotton growers.

"Take these advantages," Collins says, "couple them with the Roundup Ready traits where a farmer can effectively control competing weeds and not hurt the young cotton plants and you have a very effective tool for the farmer to put in his crop toolbox."

The gate to effective, profitable cotton production opened with the eradication of the boll weevil by the national Boll Weevil Eradication Program. Before this program came around, the weevil had effectively shut down cotton production in the US, particularly for dryland production.

Collins, who practices being a good neighbor to everyone, believes people in agriculture today, faced with increasing production costs, weather problems, uncertain marketing problems and attacks from naive environmentalists, often forget they are all part of the same family.

"We all, most of us, anyhow, produce many different crops and livestock in order to make a living," he said. "Cotton can help grain farmers to stop weed problems in their grain fields. Cotton provides farmers with a spring-planted, fall-harvested crop that will bring in money along with winter wheat and cattle. It is a real partner in rotations with other summer crops like corn, grain sorghum and other crops."

On the world's stage, in spite of the spread of transgenic crop varieties to other countries and the constant jockeying for preferred positions in world markets between the US and other countries, Collins doesn't see these countries about to offset the advantages that America's farmers and farm industries still have.

"We in the US are fortunate to have a country with a real bread basket; the central plains states." he said. "Our scientists and engineers are never behind in the development of new, environmentally-friendly pesticides and farming equipment. Other countries, mostly those whose farmers are still farming under primitive conditions, compared to the US, still are not able to effectively and economically farm the large land areas necessary to feed millions of people. There are other developed countries who use modern farming technology, but the US farmer still leads the way."

No other crop, Collins believes, offers a better, complete package of technological advantages to the farmer than cotton. "Unlike the old cotton farming practices were," he said, "planting and harvesting are the two biggest challenges for the cotton farmer. No-till and minimum tillage practices preserve soil nutrients and water and the new varieties are highly effective partners with these farming techniques. Harvesting technology is constantly evolving to make this time shorter and more efficient for cotton producers.

"Availability of modern gins with all of their other services available to farmers enhance cotton production," he said.

In other words, Collins explained, cotton production in the 21st Century is one of the most complete production packages available for farmers to use.

Practicing what he preaches, Collins and his wife, Ann, along with their two daughters, Kim and Pam, and their families, are excellent examples of what family farming is today.

Along with their cotton, they produce wheat, hay and other crops with no-till farming practices. They also run a herd of beef cows on improved pastures with bermuda and plains bluestem grasses. Now retired from driving the tractor and hitching the plow, Collins' land is farmed by Brad McKinley, who also lives in Frederick.

"We are no different than anyone else who is trying to make a living," Collins says. "All of us have to work together to do an effective job of farming. All of us need to share information, new ideas and cooperate in being true stewards of the land, something we all share and must take care of so future farmers can continue to feed our nation and others."

