



## Future Challenges for Oklahoma Cotton Farmers

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Frederick, Oklahoma -- Some real challenges face Oklahoma cotton farmers in 2006, according to Bob Collins, secretary of the Oklahoma Cotton Council.

Coming off two successive record crops in 2004 and 2005, cotton is just now becoming established again as a major agricultural commodity in the rolling plains of North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, Collins explained.

"I have been a cotton farmer most of my life," he said. "If someone had told me 20 years ago cotton would no longer be one of the three major sources of income to farmers in this vicinity, I would have laughed at them," he said.



Like a lot of other people who relied on cotton for an important paycheck throughout the years, Collins knew the boll weevil was a serious threat to making a good crop. Then, in the decade of the 1990s, the boll weevil effectively shut down upland cotton production across the U. S. cotton belt.. The bug made it too expensive to farm cotton. Each year, more and more insecticide applications were needed to fight the weevil, Collins said.

"I accepted the responsibility of being executive secretary of the Oklahoma Cooperative Cotton Ginners Assn. in 1981," he explained. "There were 84 cooperative cotton gins and 30 gins owned by the Chickasha Cotton Oil Co. and independent owners in this area. Now there are 18 cooperative gins and two independent owned gins."

In other words, the boll weevil put 94 cotton processing centers permanently out of business. Another example of the negative effect of the boll weevil took place in 1997 in Tillman County, once the leading Oklahoma cotton producing county, when five farm cooperatives were dissolved to become one cooperative. Six cotton gins were closed forever. The new cooperative, Tillman

County Producers Cooperative, reopened the Red River gin southwest of Frederick to take care of what cotton was being produced. That gin expects to process 48,000 bales for the 2005 season.

"What saved the cotton industry across the U. S., not just in the Rolling Plains, was the boll weevil eradication program," Collins said. "The boll weevil is no longer a problem for cotton farmers."

But there are other challenges ahead for cotton farmers, he said. A battle has been joined between the Bush Administration and members of Congress who represent cotton producing states, Collins said.

"Bush Administration negotiators who are working with the World Trade Organization and other cotton producing nations think U. S. cotton farmers have to give up some important government production incentives so the U.S. can compete effectively in world markets," Collins explained. "On the other hand, Congress has told Administration representatives they don't intend to make any big changes in the 2007 farm act that is being formed."

Typically, dry weather, some call it a drought, is making cotton farmers uneasy right now, Collins said.

"If you drive north past Hobart, Oklahoma," he said, "the winter wheat doesn't look too bad. Although it probably hasn't been enough, farmers up there have had more rain than farther south. If we don't get some good rains during this next month, there won't be much wheat to harvest."

Without a wheat crop to harvest, Collins believes more farmers will be planting cotton so they can put some money in the bank before wheat planting starts next fall.

"There will be more cotton planted this year," he said. "And if we do get good rains in the next two months, I believe there will be even more cotton planted. A lot of farmers will plant more cotton than ever. An indication of this is that all of the cotton seed available for 2006 spring planting is spoken for. There is very little cotton seed to be found right now."

With these challenges on international and local stages looming in the future, Collins is now riding a new horse. In August, 2005, the Cooperative Ginners Assn. of Oklahoma, the Cotton Cooperative Foundation, Inc. and the Oklahoma Cotton Cooperative Assn. faded away to become one group, the Oklahoma Cotton Council.

Collins who had been executive secretary of the cotton ginner's group, accepted the challenge of leading the new organization.

"We needed to regroup and put all of our effort into one organization that would not only service the cotton farmer, ginner and warehouseman, but also be a leader in pushing for more cotton research and legislative help." Collins said. "We are going to be more active in seeking legislation that will assist cotton production in Oklahoma and we are going to help OSU and other entities in cotton research."

Collins, who at one time, only worried about his cotton farm and the responsibilities of being Tillman County School Superintendent, has seen cotton production in the good times and when it almost failed completely.

Now, there is a new awakening. Exciting developments like transgenic cotton varieties and modern farming practices like no-till cultivation are helping cotton to regain its place in agricultural production.

But some of these practices have not been tested in times of drought. Cotton marketing companies are worried about the loss of American textile mills. Cotton can be exported to China or South Korea, milled into shirts and then sold back to U. S. consumers cheaper than if produced entirely in this country.

These are exciting times for cotton production in this country, but there is a lot of uncertainty.

"One thing is for sure," Collins said, "the future won't be dull. When I started working with cotton people, I had to learn fast. And I am still learning. Cotton is on its way back and I am happy to be along for the ride."

