



Growing Cotton in Oklahoma's Big Wheat Country

Fairview, Ok.--NTOK Cotton news report--There is a new crop growing in Oklahoma's big wheat country. The mature crop is white and fluffy and will be processed into bales at a gin in Anthony, Ks.

The crop is cotton, the first grown in the counties north and west of Enid since the 1950s.

Farmers who are growing cotton for the first time in several decades in this location are excited about its potential. Greg Heath, who farms near Canton with his brother, Paul, sees a lot to like in his new cotton crop.

"We started no-till farming six years ago," Greg said. "We were looking for a crop that would work with wheat in a no-till culture. We found there are two crops that are heat and drought tolerant, sunflowers and cotton.

"We decided to go with cotton because it is a more stable crop, insurable, traded on the board of trade. It is a basic commodity that is as old as time itself."

Greg said the last cotton grown by his family was grown by his father in 1955 and the boll weevils wiped it out. Since then, a national boll weevil eradication program has stopped the weevil problem.

The Heath brothers had the unenviable position of planting their first cotton crop in the middle of the worst drought on record for the Southern Plains. But the dryland cotton they planted in the North Canadian River bottoms where there is more subsoil moisture will "yield a bale per acre," Greg said. That is really good dryland cotton in any year. In a year of extreme drought, it is an outstanding achievement.



The Heaths were not unscathed by the drought; they planted 300 acres of cotton. "Two hundred acres looks pretty good," Greg said. "The rest had less than an inch of rain all season and it will be harvestable, but only barely."

Although they are waiting on harvest and it's revelations, the Heaths intend to grow more cotton in 2007. " We probably will plant 400 to 600 acres next year," Greg said. "We are looking for a reliable crop to work into our wheat and stocker cattle operation."

Each year the Heath brothers plant around 900 acres of wheat to be grazed out by stocker cattle and farm another 2,000 acres of crop ground.



Over at Fairview, Matt Gard, a member of the Oklahoma State University 2005 farmer leadership class, is another farmer searching for a crop to place in rotation with what his family has grown for years, soybeans.

Gard really suffered from the drought, only receiving 6.3 inches of rain on his home farm since August, 2005. He planted some dryland cotton that burned up. On two circles of center pivot irrigated cotton, he had better luck, a lot better luck. "Two different agronomists have looked at one circle," he said, "and they predict it will yield three to four bales of cotton per acre."

Gard, a diversified farmer, grows wheat, milo, soybeans and cotton. He also does a lot of custom farming, planting fall and spring crops and harvesting hay for his client farmers.

In 2005, Gard, in company with the OSU farmer leadership program, visited southwest Oklahoma, historically a top cotton-growing area. In Jackson County, Gard said, he was fortunate to learn about cotton production from such people as Dr. J. C. Banks, OSU Extension state cotton specialist, Dr. Miles Karner, OSU Extension state entomologist and Charles Abernathy, Altus, Ok., farmer, who, at that time, was president of the Plains Cotton Cooperative Assn. "They showed us different cotton management systems and really put that desire in our minds to try the crop up here," he said.

Heath and Gard, along with several other top farmers, were encouraged to try growing cotton when they attended producer meetings held by farmer owners of the Southern Kansas Cotton Growers Cooperative located at Winfield and Anthony, Kansas. Ironically, Kansas farmers have been growing cotton successfully for several years now and there are several large, modern cotton gins located along the Kansas-Oklahoma state line.

Gary Feist, manager of the Southern Kansas Cotton Growers gin at Anthony, Ks, accompanied by a Kansas State University-educated agronomist employed by the cooperative, held a series of producer meetings at Fairview and Canton in 2005 and early 2006 to encourage farmers to try growing cotton as a viable crop in rotation with the familiar crop of wheat. "We are excited that a lot of top farmers north and east of Enid, in northern Grant County and in the Fairview, Canton and Okeene areas decided to try cotton for the first time," Feist said. "We are the closest modern cotton gin for these farmers to use. Modern cotton harvesting is a lot different from the way it was decades ago. Now we harvest the cotton and mold it into modules that are parked at the edge of the field and picked up by trucks according to a ginning schedule. The moduled cotton is tightly packed and covered with large tarpaulins, making it almost impervious to weather."



Feist's gin is working hard now, processing cotton from Kansas farmers. They have ginned more than 2,000 bales to date; they are expecting to gin at least 45,000 bales this season, he said.

"We think cotton will really work for farmers in this area of north central Oklahoma," Feist said. "The drought up here has left us with little or no rain for many months. We probably won't have much wheat pasture and the milo crop suffered from the heat and dry weather. Farmers who have been watching their neighbors grow cotton for four or five years successfully, in spite of this drought, are beginning to realize they aren't doing it for their health."

Feist explained a milo crop has been a disaster for one of his good farmer customers. "He has his first crop of cotton this year and will make 400 to 500 pounds of lint per acre, that is a bale per acre. He says he may give up on the milo and go to a wheat and cotton rotation in the future."

Feist points out the advantages of cotton are good drought and heat tolerance, high yields from modern transgenic varieties that have built-in protection against weed invasion and pink bollworm attack and freedom from boll weevil depredations now.

"Just as important," he said. "cotton is a recognized crop by the USDA. It is a basic crop that is grown under a farm program, has crop insurance protection and is traded on several boards of trade."

Feist explains several different crops have been and are being tried out across the plains states to find one that will be a big hitter in rotations with wheat, grain sorghum, soybeans and corn in both dryland and irrigated cultures. Such crops as sunflower, safflower and canola have been tried out at different times and different places, he said. It is his belief cotton offers a viable opportunity for farmers simply because it can be practically grown, harvested, processed, stored and sold in a stable and predictable environment.

These are important considerations that have yet to be worked out with the other crops, he said. "Both Kansas State and Oklahoma State are working diligently to establish canola as a workable crop for this area," he said. "I think if they had worked just as hard to establish cotton here, we would have to build more cotton gins."

This is a report from NTOK Cotton.org., a cotton industry partnership which encourages increased cotton production in the Rolling Plains of North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. For more information on the current cotton scene, check out our websites, ntokcotton.org and okiecotton.org.

