



Cotton is the new crop on the block in the high plains of the Oklahoma Panhandle

Where water is precious and fertilizer costing more than ever before, plains farmers are finding cotton provides them with a high-yielding product that uses less water and fertilizer than more traditional crops.

Father and son farmers Raymon and Kenny Lunsford of Guymon are among the first Oklahoma Panhandle producers to grow cotton big-time. In fact, their first-ever cotton crop was grown in 2002.



"Before we started growing cotton," Kenny Lunsford said, "my dad and I were looking seriously for a crop to grow in combination with corn, grain sorghum and wheat. Our irrigated corn was costing more to grow each year."

Raymon, who has farmed all of his life, was the one who had to be convinced to try cotton, Kenny said. When they started asking around about trying cotton, they talked to some farmers in the Plainview, Tex., region and found they were quitting cotton. "But after checking farther, we discovered those farmers were suffering from a lack of available water for irrigation."

So, Kenny went to Kansas where farmers had been successfully growing the white fiber for several years and new cotton gins were popping up at several different locations.

"In 2000, I spent several days with Kansas cotton specialists, gin managers and farmers," Kenny said. "My mind was made up the day I spent riding on a cotton stripper watching the machine's yield meter climb as we harvested."

Once their minds were made up, the father and son didn't take long to get the planters rolling. This year, 2005, the Lunsfords have 5,100 acres of center pivot irrigated cotton and 1,029 acres of dryland cotton.

Getting this year's crop started wasn't easy, Kenny said. "Due to a big hail out, we had to replant 1,200 acres. The portion we had to replant looks fair to good right now. The rest of it looks really good and has good potential for excellent yields."

As stated earlier, Lunsford likes cotton for its yield and price potential, but particularly for its positive growth characteristics. "This year, we put 17 inches of irrigation water on our corn and just five inches on our cotton. We have used less fertilizer on our cotton compared to other crops and due to its technological advantages like stacked gene varieties, it is less trouble to grow."

Lunsford said he followed the advice of his cotton consultant Loran Seaman, Hugoton, Ks., and sprayed twice for thrips. They also had to spray the cotton to combat bollworms. This year, they used just one variety, Paymaster 2145, a Roundup Ready early maturing variety selected for the High Plains short growing season. Lunsford said he also likes the variety because it is a hairy leafed plant. "Hairy leafed cotton plants are more resistant to 2,4-D problems than smooth leafed cotton," Lunsford said. 2,4-D cotton contamination is a common problem on the plains, he said.

To prepare his cotton land, Lunsford said he uses strip till where a 30 inch ripper knife opens up the ground. "We fertilizer those strips using tractor-mounted soil monitoring systems so we can put the fertilizer where it is really needed," he said.

The Lunsfords harvest their own cotton and take it to the Northwest Cotton Growers gin near Moscow, KS., where Jerry Stuckey is manager, Lunsford said.
