



Robbie Robbins, Altus

Altus, Ok.--Rolling Plains cotton farmers are waiting to see what August will bring them this year.

It makes no difference if they farm dryland cotton or if they farm in the Lugert-Altus Irrigation District in Jackson County; everyone is praying for a soaking rain and realizing they are seized by one of the worst droughts on record.

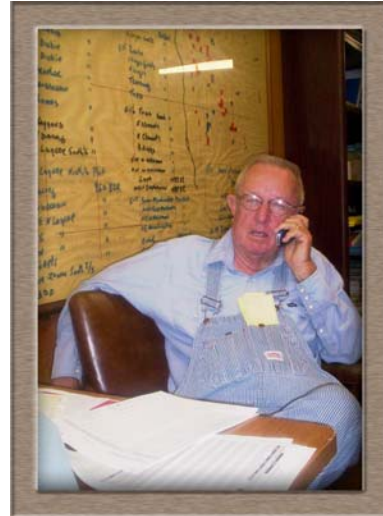
District farmers were allotted eight inches of water this year from Lake Altus, the impoundment that furnishes water for the district. Important rains that fall on the water shed north of the lake never came this year.

District farmers have been managing their water allotments as well as they possibly can.

Robert "Robbie" Robbins, who planted his 50th consecutive cotton crop in the district this year, has painstakingly stretched out his water allotment. "This crop could be the hardest crop I have ever managed," Robbins said. "What is frustrating is if we would get a three inch, soaking rain next week, we could make a bale and a half to the acre. I don't like to think what will happen if we don't get a good rain soon. We have held onto our water, trying to keep some for August. But there isn't enough in the allotment to get into the last of August."

Here is a veteran cotton farmer with 5,700 acres of irrigated cotton thinking wistfully about bale and a half cotton on irrigated land.

In a good year with plenty of water, three bales to the acre is not unusual for the district, Robbins said.



Because the drought has been around this time for so long, farmers did not have enough subsoil moisture to plant cotton satisfactorily in May, Robbins said.

"We planted some of our cotton three and four times and still had several acres where we never could get a stand," he said. "If we got a shower with about seven or eight tenths of an inch where we planted, the cotton still wouldn't come up because after the plant's tap root went down three or four inches, it hit hard, dry ground and stopped."

Robbins says water demand by this year's crop was particularly difficult to satisfy. "Since we didn't have any subsurface moisture to start with, we would irrigate and if there was an area in a field where we let the water run an hour less, you could plainly see where that cotton was stunted," he said. "We never could get enough water on it to make a difference down at the root level."

Robbins says he and his son, Danny, and their farm manager, Jeff Lorah, have tried to go as far into August as possible with the water they have, but they didn't want to put too much water on it and make the plants lose their bolls.

"In dry times," Robbins said, "you can put too much water on drought-stressed cotton and throw it into shock. It will shed its load of bolls and start growing all over again. We sure don't want to waste everything we have accomplished the last two months of the growing season. We don't have enough time left in the growing season for the plants to put on another boll load."

Irrigation district managers have added new equipment that keeps water in the main canal and ditches at a lower level; reducing the amount of seepage from the flowing water into fields along the canal and ditches, Robbins said.

Modern improvements such as this and using the advice of Oklahoma State University Extension cotton experts have helped farmers do a good job of growing their cotton this year in spite of the drought, he said.

"We have been very fortunate to have had two knowledgeable, dedicated OSU cotton specialists here," Robbins explained. "Our first one was N. B. Thomas. J. C. Banks is the Extension specialist now. I have seen both of them out in a field with a farmer on Sunday helping to solve problems. Both of them have worked just as hard on the weekend as during the week."

Robbins says knowledge and hard work are necessary to grow a crop of cotton, and a good rain occasionally helps, too, even in the Lugert-Altus Irrigation District.

