

TALKIN' COTTON

WHAT TO DO, what to do? This is the question passing through many farmers' minds today who grow crops in the North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas portion of the Southern Plains.

Grain and fiber prices are the highest they have been in decades; at the same time, expenses for fuel, lubrication and labor are high as well. And the potential for a serious drought, now a certainty on the High Plains, lurks just a few weeks away. Attending a meeting of cotton growers last week at Altus, Ok., the chairman asked Roger Fischer, a Frederick, Ok., producer, to open the meeting with a prayer. Fischer prayed for rain. There were a lot of "Amen's," spoken by growers when Fischer finished.

So, this is the situation. Anyone who farms in this area knows one certainty is a shortage of moisture. Granted, there are times when there is too much moisture, even flooding, but as the native to western Oklahoma said, "If you hear anyone complaining about too much rain, they haven't lived here long enough."

Farmers like Fischer and his neighbor, Phil Bohl, Chattanooga, Ok., know whatever the weather provides, they can't deviate much from their regular farming technique. Both dryland farmers, they make use of the latest in farming technology like GPS direction equipment on their tractors and harvesters and no-till or minimum-tillage to preserve soil moisture and nutrients and to control soil erosion.

To begin with, neither farmer grazed any winter wheat this winter, preferring to keep the crop growing for harvest when prices are good. With cotton prices higher than any time in several past decades, they will plant the latest transgenic Roundup Ready Flex and BollGard II varieties with built-in weed, insect and disease capabilities.

Their cotton will be planted either no-till or minimum-till (as few passes over the fields as possible) to establish a seedbed in soil which has been kept cooler and holds more moisture and nutrients than soil which has received traditional tillage practices.

With good prices being paid for the return from their crops, they must do the best job they can to get the best yields they can at harvest. If it doesn't rain and summer comes with hot, dry weather, they will "dust in" their cotton. In other words, just plant the crop and hope for the best. There are just so many crops that will work in dryland farming and as all good farmers do, they have a definite rotation pattern where wheat is planted on one field one year and cotton the next and grain sorghum the next and so on. A good rotation program is a must to take advantage of different prices for different crops and to keep the land productive in cool and warm seasons. Rotating crops is also necessary to prevent a buildup of liabilities like soil-borne diseases and weeds that adhere to a particular crop.

So, if it hasn't rained by May 25, Bohl and Fischer, after putting their preplant herbicides and fertilizer in the soil, will plant their cotton. With some bags of transgenic cottonseed costing over \$300 per bag, planting in a dry soil does take faith that rain will eventually come.

Knowing about the world-wide demand for cotton products and the market paying more than \$1.50 per pound for lint cotton, Fischer says he will plant more cotton this year. "Most of the time I rotate my cotton ground at least every two years," he said. "But this year, I intend to plant more cotton by returning to the same fields where I have planted cotton for the past two years."

Farther east in Tillman County, Bohl will not only plant his usual cotton crop, but will also plant more cotton as well. "We are taking on more acreage by custom farming for other people," he said. "This will allow us to have more cotton when prices are high."

But there is no free lunch for these farmers either. Diesel fuel for tractors and harvesters costs more now. Other inputs have increased as well. One of the main reasons there are fewer farmers today is fewer people are willing to take on the responsibility of such a task. Fewer lending agencies are willing to trust anyone except those who have proven themselves capable of bringing in a crop despite high costs and adverse weather conditions. One farmer said there is no greater gamble than farming today, particular dryland farming where the grower has no control over the most important factor, rain. A little fact know about cotton is, contrary to popular opinion, it is a plant that does well in hot, dry weather. Using its long tap root to reach down into the soil where subsoil moisture is, cotton will use less water than other money crops like corn.

LACK OF TEMIK availability, coupled with the Bayer CropScience announcement regarding the termination of production of MIC, the active ingredient in Temik, caught many cotton producers by surprise, according to information provided by the National Cotton Council this week. Producers planning to apply Temik at planting for nematode management have few alternatives beyond preplant fumigant products and seed treatments. Logistics associated with the use of fumigant products as Telone II, Vapam or K-Pam may rule out their use for 2011 unless applications already have been planned well ahead of planting.

Seed treatments such as AERIS/Trilex seed treatments or Avicta Complete Cotton, may be the grower's best option as planting approaches. Where nematodes are of little or no concern, but early season insect pressures are, insecticide seed treatment options also may be a consideration. Producers may still have time to either order seed pretreated or have existing seed stocks treated by their local dealer. Producers are encouraged to contact their seed dealer as soon as possible to arrange for either treatment option, if desired.

A more complete description of alternatives to Temik application for this current growing season and other strategies for controlling nematodes and early season pests have been summarized by the NCC's technical services staff and are available at www.cotton.org/issues/2011/temiksumm.cfm. Good information can also be found at www.ntokcotton.org.

WEED RESISTANCE to glyphosate, an increasing problem for farmers across the US, will be reviewed at a national summit hosted this fall by the National Research Council (NRC), the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences and the Weed Science Society. An NRC report, released last April, stressed that current management of herbicide tolerant crops is likely to lead to environmentally damaging practices such as greater use of more toxic pesticides and a return to tillage.

POLLINATOR PROTECTION is intended by the Environmental Protection Agency which intends to strengthen its requirements for pesticide applicators to protect bees and other pollinators. This will be the latest effort by the agency to limit pollinators' exposure to the chemicals. EPA also is weighing changes to how it assesses the risks that pesticides pose to pollinators but the revised applicator certification requirements action likely will precede that because the changes have broad support and can be implemented quickly, according to Tom Moriarty, a team leader in EPA's Pesticide Re-Evaluation Division.

SPRING AND SUMMER are the times when weather can turn mean. Such unwelcome changes as floods and tornadoes make it very important for caretakers of land and animals to be ready for anything that might happen.

To be ready for such a disaster, farmers and ranchers are urged to keep a comprehensive accounting of livestock, property or potentially hazardous substances, according to Texas A&M. Livestock may be killed, lost or stolen during such a situation. Attach animal ID tags on all animals and note the ID tag number and description of the animal. Maintain a list of machinery and equipment, including make and model numbers. Keep a list of pesticides, fertilizers, fuels, medicines and other chemicals. During a disaster, chemicals can wash into streams or contaminate food supplies, placing people and animals at risk.

A family disaster kit should be kept for such problem times. It should have sandbags and plastic sheeting in case of flood. Wire and rope should be kept to secure objects. Lumber and plywood should be on hand to protect windows. Hand tools should be available to assist in in preparation and recovery. Extra fuel for tractors and vehicles should be kept in a safe place. A safe food supply for livestock should be maintained and a gas-power generator should be kept on hand in case of power failures.

TALKIN' COTTON is produced by NTOK Cotton, a cotton industry which supports and encourages increased cotton production in the Rolling Plains of North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. For more information on the cotton scene, see ntokcotton.org and oikiecotton.org. For questions and comments on Talkin' Cotton, contact eventerprise1@hughes.net.