



Dewey County farmer Neal Stephenson shows some of his dryland cotton growing north of the South Canadian River. This field and one in Woodward County are the only fields of cotton he will harvest this year due to a record-setting drought affecting the Southern Plains. (NTOK Cotton photo)

By Vic Schoonover
NTOK Cotton

Taloga, Ok.-Neal Stephenson has some dryland cotton he can harvest this year; even in the middle of the worst drought Oklahoma has ever experienced. Farming in Woodward, Custer and Dewey Counties, Stephenson planted cotton for the first time in 2010. Wanting to add another money crop to his farming effort, he planted 1,300 acres of dryland cotton.

Averaging 550 pounds of lint cotton per acre in 2010, he planted more this year, rotating with winter wheat.

"I really like cotton," he said, "it is the only crop you can make any money on."

Stephenson will harvest a lot less cotton this year, he said. "Extreme dry weather left us with only two locations totaling 480 acres where the cotton will be worth harvesting," he said. "And what happened is really strange. My best cotton is located in two different counties and covers the same acreage at both locations. To make it even stranger, there are three different fields planted to three different cotton varieties."

All of his cotton was planted early, beginning April 28, he said. All of the fields with harvestable cotton received rain just before he planted, Stephenson said.

"Here in Dewey County, only four inches of rain has fallen on this field since November, 2010," he said. "I planted FiberMax 1740 B2F here May 4 this year."

The other fields were planted this year with DeltaPine 0912 B2RF and 0924 B2RF varieties, he said. All of the cotton was planted no-till in wheat stubble, he said. In 2010, he planted DeltaPine 104 B2RF and 0924 B2RF. All of these varieties are Roundup Ready helping the farmer with weed control and bollgard to combat plant diseases and insects.

"I won't plant any cotton varieties without the Roundup Ready and Bollgard ingredients," he said. "If you grow cotton, you need to use the best technology you can find."

Interestingly enough, Stephenson told his interviewer the South Canadian River bottomland where he farms was covered with cotton at one time. "There was a cotton gin at Webb, just a few miles east of here," he said. "The man who owned the gin had at 12,000 acres of cotton planted around here. He built a 60 by 60 foot two-story home with a full basement at this location. The gin at Webb closed in 1958."

Stephenson gins his cotton at the Midwestern Farmers, Inc. cooperative gin at Clinton, Ok.

Rodney Sawatsky, the cooperative manager, said a few rain showers this summer north of I40 had helped some of his cotton farmers keep a few acres of cotton growing.

Stephenson is a third-generation farmer. He and his father, Lance, have beef cattle and farm cotton, winter wheat, grain sorghum, winter canola and sesame. They also are custom harvesters.

"We will harvest anything you can harvest with a combine," Stephenson said. "Right now, we have four combines in Colorado harvesting malt barley contracted to Coors. We finished up harvesting near Longmont and we are going to start in the San Luis Valley."

Stephenson's farming responsibilities are shared with his wife Monica and their three children, Brant, 20, Katie, 17, and Lyle, 15. When she isn't working at her beautician business, his wife also "makes a good tractor and combine driver," he said.

NTOK Cotton is produced by North Texas, Oklahoma and Texas Cotton, a cotton industry group which encourages and supports increased cotton production in the Rolling Plains of North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas.