



## High Plains Farmers Live in a World of Diminishing Returns

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Cotton grower Tom Lahey realizes this is the case. He believes cotton is the answer for farmers who are struggling with a dwindling supply of irrigation water and increasing production costs.



"We have grown record yielding irrigated cotton with a season of just four to six inches of water, while irrigated corn needs at least 12 to 14 inches," Lahey said.

Lahey and Jerry Stuckey, whose land Lahey farms, were the first two farmers to grow cotton in the southwest Kansas area, he said. In 2000, they each planted 40 acres to try out the new crop. The rest, as they say, is history.

The next year, they planted 600 acres of cotton apiece. Some of their neighbors planted cotton, too. In 2001, about 4,500 acres of the white crop was planted around Moscow. All of it had to be hauled to a cotton gin at Hereford, Texas, to be processed, Lahey said.

Not too pleased with their commuting problem, Lahey, Stuckey and three other farmers, Bob Davis, Randy Lucas and Jay Garetson, completed a feasibility study on building their own cotton gin.

In Jan., 2002, they broke ground on a \$3.2 million gin. It was completed in Oct, 2002, and doubled in size in 2004 with an upgrade in electronics.

Like a lot of other pleased cotton farmers throughout the cotton belt, they experienced an unusual happening, two succeeding years of record cotton yields.

Then came the drought of 2006 and the current situation is a lot different, as Lahey will tell you.

"We had exceptionally dry weather in May," Lahey said. "We planted most of our cotton early in the month and it really got dry by May 24. In June, this county, Seward County, got .9 of an inch in rain, but across the county, we only got an inch and a half that was scattered. We didn't get any general rains."

However, in early July, southwestern Kansas, as well as a large portion of the high plains received from three to four inches of general rain, brought in from the Colorado mountains. With that encouragement, Lahey and Stucky believe they will get some good yields in the Moscow area.

"If conditions stay hot and we get a rain in late July or early August we could get something like 800 pounds per acre yields dryland cotton and 1,200 pounds for our irrigated cotton," Stuckey, manager of the Northwest Cotton Growers gin, said.



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(Jerry Stucky, Tom Lahey)

He is counting on 4,800 acres of dryland cotton for the gin at Moscow and 33,000 acres of irrigated cotton. If it had rained in May, he believes there would have been a lot more dryland cotton to gin.

Lahey has 1,700 acres of dryland cotton and 3,500 acres of cotton growing in center pivot irrigation circles. Like most high plains cotton farmers, the majority of the varieties he is using are hairy-leaved cotton varieties. The farmers believe these varieties offer greater resistance to 2,4-D drift damage that is a reoccurring problem in that area.

He is using Stoneville 2448, Deltapine 2145, 2140 and 113.

Because he believes farmers are becoming better educated and more responsible with using herbicides, he is trying some semi-smooth leafed varieties this year.

Lahey and other high plains cotton farmers are practicing no till for their dryland acreage and strip till for the irrigated circles.

"We must control our ground moisture," Lahey said. "And with the extremely high costs of fuel for running farming equipment and irrigation pumps, no till is really proving itself for us."

High plains farmers will be looking even closer to cotton in the future for its decreased need for irrigation water compared to corn and milo, Lahey said.

Southwest Kansas will soon have at least four new ethanol plants, he said. Corn will be the primary source of making the fuel and there will be a lot of it grown when the plants come on line, Stuckey said.

"Farmers are taking irrigation water from 400 to 600 foot deep wells in the Ogallala aquifer now," Stuckey said. "When farmers with big wells pump more water, they take away what the smaller wells can provide. When they start growing enough corn to feed the ethanol plants, we will see a real drawdown on our underground water."

So, modern cotton production, not just for its intrinsic value, but to accommodate the diminishing supply of irrigation water, could well be the crop of the future on the high plains.