

Thompson on Cotton: Wildly Variable Crops Going into Home Stretch

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The main topic of conversation this week concerns the cotton market's unexpected 295-point loss last Friday, settling below 60 cents for the first time since 2016. Actions by both the US and China clearly indicated an escalation in the ongoing trade war between the two countries. At the news, panic selling ensued sending the commodity and financial markets reeling. We will discuss this in much more detail in our next Market Commentary.

Other conversations from the tailgate center around the crop itself, as it so often does when entering the home stretch. I have never seen a crop which encompasses such a wide range of age and yield potential.

We knew from the start maturity covered a wide breadth from cotton planted in mid-April to that double cropped and seeded in late June. Then, when considering most of our rainfall has been random isolated showers, yields are all over the board, as well.

Southeast Conditions

Over the past several weeks, rain showers have been few and far between across the region. Coupled with extreme heat, one can easily understand how the Southeast crop has taken a step backward; a situation we desperately needed to avoid in lieu of declining prices. To our good fortune, showers this past weekend were more numerous greatly benefiting our younger cotton.

The oldest cotton has already begun to cut out being kicked into high gear by these same weather conditions. As a result, I feel certain we will have some cotton harvested in September.

Depending on when and where it rained, there is a wide discrepancy in yields. Case in point, this week we observed two separate fields only a few miles apart as the crow flies. One has been shedding fruit for some time and likely won't pick a bale to the acre while the other, with favorable weather the remainder of the season, could yield over two. With four to five weeks of bloom remaining cotton that has yet to cut out still has some potential.

Southwest Conditions

The August heat has hit the Southwest hard this week. Temperatures are predicted to reach 105 for the next seven days in parts of West Texas. It's proving that even with the amount of moisture received throughout the winter and spring months, an August rain still has the final say.

Irrigated cotton looks great; some places more than others. We've been able to stay on top of the watering this year. Although these temperatures this week might put that to the test. The cotton that has developed a good tap root is hanging in there. However, as previously mentioned, some of the cotton that had adequate moisture early on never fully developed a deep tap root and it's

starting to show. Every day that passes without a rain, drastically lowers the chances of turning this crop around. This is unfortunate given the potential we had coming into this season.

The Southwest is a mixed bag this year, as it always is. It also ranges from one extreme to the other in maturity, often in the same county. The hope here is that with a little luck we won't get an early freeze which could give this crop the time it needs to fully mature. That and a rain, of course.

Crop Outlook

The latest USDA crop conditions report issued last Friday is reflective of the conditions mentioned above. The percent of the US crop rated good to excellent declined to 54 percent compared to 61 percent last week. We've all seen crops either made or lost in August and September depending on the weather.

In the Southeast, the Wiregrass area can expect little in the way of relief while remaining dry. In the Southwest, drought development is likely. It wouldn't take much of a drought to have a significant impact since most plants in this region are shallow rooted due to early season rains.

Insect Management

In late summer, we become most concerned with stink bugs and escaped bollworms. Stink bugs have become a routine pest usually requiring treatment in mid to late summer. The brown and southern green species are notorious feeders on young bolls resulting in reduced yield and fiber quality. Monitor for this insect until the last harvestable bolls are over 25 days old. If economic thresholds are exceeded recommended insecticides include Bidrin, bifenthrin, or a pyrethroid which will provide 10 to 14 days residual control.

In recent years a new stink bug species has become rather prevalent, it's the brown marmorated stinkbug. This pest is usually found concentrated along the border rows of fields. The difference in this stinkbug species is its ability to damage bolls from thumb

size all the way up to those cracking. Therefore, monitoring efforts for the BMSB should continue into October.

Bollworm resistance to two gene Bt toxins is ever increasing. For the remainder of the season, I encourage you to scout closely for any escapes concentrating your efforts where Bollgard 2, Twin Link, and Widestrike varieties are planted. Significant resistance has not been detected to date in Bollgard 3, Twin Link Plus, or Widestrike 3 varieties, giving us greater confidence in their effectiveness.

The economic threshold for treatment is four worms found per 100 plants. Recommended insecticides include, Besiege or Prevathon providing up to two weeks of residual control. Normally, around Labor Day bollworm escapes are no longer a concern. However, as Dr. Ron Smith suggests, with so much late cotton in the mix continue monitoring for escapes as long as there are enough small squares on the plant to feed one day old larvae. After cut out when such squares are shed, the bollworm should be of no concern.

Keep in mind with such a wide range of plant maturity all insect management decisions should be made on a field by field basis.

Mental Maps

Prior to getting busy preparing for harvest, I encourage you to take some time to make mental notes on what is going on in your fields, such as weed pressure, low fertility, signs of foliar disease, irregular stand counts, etc. In doing so you can research for possible causes and implement production practices next year to prevent a recurrence.

Determine Timing of Harvest Aids

Experience has taught us there are basically three ways to determine if a cotton plant is mature enough to apply harvest aid materials. This is very important because applying such products prematurely can result in reduced yields and lower fiber quality. Conversely, late applications can result in harvest delays and increased incidence of boll rot. All these methods are accurate, but

I would suggest using them in combination to insure proper application timing.

Percent open bolls – When 60 percent of the bolls on the plant have opened its considered safe to apply defoliant. However, this year where it's not uncommon to have different ages of cotton in the same field, I would recommend using 75 percent open bolls to be safe. Uniformity in age should be your guide in this situation.

Nodes above cracked boll (NACB) – This method is a little more scientific and much quicker and easier to use. Count the number of nodes between the uppermost first position cracked boll and the uppermost first position boll you aim to harvest. When this number reaches 3 to 4 NACB it is safe to apply harvest aids.

Pocketknife technique – This is the old tried and true method most often used. Using a pocket knife cut a cross section of a boll. When doing so a harvestable boll should have lint that strings out as you cut, and the seed should have a darkened seed coat around its edges.