

What's in Store for Texas Cotton Growers in 2023

Lessons learned from the 2022 crop year can help growers set the foundation for this year's cotton planning.

BY KYLIE FARMER

It's no secret to the Texas cotton grower that 2022 was not an ideal year. The rains stopped coming, prices fell, and drought persisted.

Though the 2022 season is still fresh on the minds of many, planting a new crop of Texas cotton is rapidly approaching. As cotton growers prepare for the rush of planting, what can they do now to try and improve their crop?

"I always tell growers, 'Be a master at controlling the things that you can control,'" said Dr. Benjamin McKnight, Professor and Statewide Extension Cotton Specialist. "What I mean by that is a lot of our decision making on management practices should be based on gathering as much information as possible."

McKnight and Kerry Siders, Extension Agent, Integrated Pest Management for Hockley, Cochran, and Lamb Counties, provided input on how the 2022 season may impact growers' approach to the 2023 season and what predictions they have for this year.

Drought Conditions

"The big elephant in the room is if will we see a repeat of 2022, particularly in terms of drought conditions," Siders said. "We're still in severe drought in many of the cotton growing areas of Texas."

A look at the National Integrated Drought Information System's January 10 update categorizes over half of Texas in some severity of drought. The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook predicts that these conditions will persist through March 2023.

Some experts are predicting La Niña conditions to weaken in the spring and lessen drought conditions in the Cotton Belt, but Siders still notes the severity of the drought as something for growers to continue monitoring before buying inputs and making management plans.

Hesitation to Plant Cotton

McKnight notes one main repercussion of last year will be fewer acres of Texas cotton planted in 2023.

"Given what happened with the cotton crop and how some other commodity prices are," he explained, "some growers are thinking about shifting more of their acres out of cotton."

This hesitation will not just impact total cotton acreage in Texas, but how growers approach their pest management.

“Anytime you have another crop that has more acreage than normal and is adjacent to cotton, you get into some issues where you have some additional pest issues to worry about in your cotton crop,” McKnight added.

Increased Thrips Pressure

With an increase in acres of wheat planted, one pest Siders anticipates seeing more of is thrips.

“Thrips is always our primary concern in cotton in terms of insects,” Siders said. “I would anticipate the pressure from thrips being higher than normal because of the sheer acreage of wheat cover, whether those acres are contiguous or not.”

As an entomologist, Siders encourages growers to have a game plan of how they will deal with increased thrips pressure. He said the best first line of defense is to choose a seed variety that has an insecticide seed treatment to control thrips. Foliar applications can be made later, but later applications are typically less effective.

Volunteer Concerns

Every year, there is a certain amount of volunteer plants from the previous year’s crop. Siders predicts 2023 will see more volunteer than usual.

“We had a lot of acres of cotton that were destroyed late, but a lot of that cotton had already produced seed that will come back in 2023,” he noted. “We’ve got to deal with that because they’ll take precious nutrients and moisture and space from those plants that’ll be harvested in the row.”

With increased volunteer problems, Siders said growers will need to consider the varieties planted last year, as varieties different than those planted this year will impact management practices. Then, growers can proactively plan the best ways to use herbicides to treat volunteer problems this season.

High Input Costs

Both Siders and McKnight agree that while input costs are still high, they do not anticipate prices reaching the same levels as last year. Though this is a bit of a break for growers, it is always important to remain vigilant and start early to find the best prices.

“Take advantage of good pricing when it happens whether that's an herbicide, insecticide, fertilizer, or fuel,” Siders advised. “That's how we have to pinch these pennies – by procuring some of that now.”

2022 was a prime example of the volatility of input prices. Siders cited global conflicts, supply chain issues, and crop failure as examples of how quickly projected prices can change, making it even more important for growers to monitor conditions that may impact input prices in 2023.

Although it is early to have exact numbers on input prices, total acreage, and other factors that will impact the 2023 season, it was clear that both Siders and McKnight have faith in the intuition of the Texas cotton grower to make the best decisions pre-harvest.

Both offer two specific pieces of advice to growers as they make their cropping decisions for 2023.

Soil Sampling: In the months leading up to planting, Siders and McKnight recommend that growers collect soil samples and have them tested. Knowing the fertility of the soil from these samples can help growers know exactly how much fertilizer to purchase and can potentially cut costs.

“Historically, only the top six inches of the soil was tested,” Siders said. “That’s good, but not good enough to measure the fertility that is actually available to the plant. If you sample down to 24 inches, you’re going to get a better picture of what you can save on instead of spend on for the upcoming growing season.”

McKnight agreed that due to cotton’s long, central taproot, cotton can utilize nutrients and moisture deeper in the profile than other row crops. He also mentioned a study conducted by Texas AgriLife Extension that found if enough nitrogen was present in the soil to meet yield goals, 98% of the time there was no additional yield response when additional nitrogen was applied. The study took 48-inch samples.

“Going into 2023 with prices the way they are and weather the way it was last year,” McKnight said, “there may be some residual plant nutrients there and I think it would be a fantastic idea for folks to figure out what they have there already.”

Scouting: Siders says having an active scouting program is especially important for busy times like planting. He recommends having an employee or consultant scout acres planted or asking to become a part of a scouting program offered by your local Extension office. Scouting will make it easier to treat any insect, weed, or disease problem that may come up this season.

“There’s no substitute for boots on the ground in the cotton field and actively scouting,” McKnight agreed.

The knowledge and skill of the Texas cotton grower is unmatched. With a proactive winter of gathering as much information as possible, procuring inputs at a reasonable price, collecting soil samples, and creating a pest management plan, Texas growers will hopefully face a more promising year than last.

Kylie Farmer is an agricultural writer living in Lubbock, TX.