

Local

Boll weevils plaguing Texas cotton farmers

Despite a rough start in some areas due to a siege of wet spring weather, Texas' cotton crop looks promising. In fact, with a general rain the next few weeks and some letup in insect activity, a good crop could result.

"Our crop went through a stress period earlier due to the extended wet weather, but the return to cotton weather has encouraged fruiting," said Dr. Bob Metzger, cotton specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

"We started the season with good deep moisture in most areas to sustain the crop, but a rain in early August would put the icing on the cake."

About 7.4 million acres were planted to cotton in Texas this spring, which is more than half of the nation's crop of about 14.2 million acres.

"We currently have the potential range of 325 to 350 pounds of lint per acre," Metzger said. "We might even get close to the 400-pound mark if needed rains come and insect damage is limited."

Boll weevils and bollworms are currently plaguing some producers, and fleahoppers caused damage in some locations, resulting in loss of early fruit set. In addition, some squares were lost to the wet weather, which also caused boll rot problems in coastal and southern areas.

"A problem looming ahead is that of cotton root rot, particularly in the Central Texas Blacklands," Metzger said. "Root rot is always a problem when

there is good soil moisture, and it tends to increase with hot weather."

Cotton in the High and Rolling Plains and western areas got off to a good start this year, the specialist said, although heavy spring storms caused considerable replanting in some locations. Irrigation is now in full swing where water is available. Hot, dry winds are depleting soil moisture, and dryland crops in these areas will need additional rain.

Harvesting is now under way in the Rio Grande Valley, with good yields, especially in well-drained fields, Metzger said.

Bolls are starting to pop open in the Coastal Bend and in some parts of South Central Texas. However, rank growth of cotton along the Coastal Bend and in many Central Texas fields will likely cause some defoliation and harvesting problems, he said.

This rank growth has prompted Metzger to urge farmers to give particular attention to practices that will reduce the number of boll weevils. These include applying an insecticide in combination with a defoliant when preparing the crop for harvest, and then destroying stalks and plowing them under as soon as possible after harvesting.

"Efforts to reduce overwintering bollweevils is particularly crucial this year because rank cotton with late fruit can provide a safe haven for boll weevils," he said.



They're finally here

Photo by Cathie Feighl

These hands are displaying the new senior rings that arrived up at the Ring Clerk's desk in Heaton Hall from 8:15 a.m. to 12 noon and from 1-5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Rings that were ordered this spring can be picked

Vegetable oil could work as fuel, but cost is high

A farmer could pour a bottle of plain ol' vegetable oil into his tractor's diesel fuel tank, but a researcher studying the substitute fuel says he wouldn't recommend it. At least not yet.

"There are several reports in the literature that vegetable oil off the grocery shelf has been used successfully as a direct substitute for diesel oil for short periods of time," said Dr. Cady Engler of the Texas A&M Food Protein Research and Development Center. "But we don't know what the long-term effects on the engine will be."

"Also, the same type of oil will work in one engine but not in another. A given diesel engine may work with one oil, such as sunflower, but not with oil from another crop."

Engler said vegetable oil currently costs twice as much as diesel but it is being studied for its application during emergency situations when diesel isn't available.

"From a farmer's standpoint, when it is time to plant or harvest, he needs fuel right then," Engler said. "If we have another interruption in petroleum imports, for example, vegetable oil might serve quite well."

"At this point, I don't know what kind of proces-

sing steps to recommend to a farmer for turning his oilseeds into diesel fuel. But I would say it would be simpler than converting grain to alcohol."

He and other researchers from the University's agricultural engineering and agricultural economics departments are working on a three-year study of vegetable oils for fuel. Current work is being funded by the Texas Energy and Natural Resources Advisory Council (TENRAC).

Engler is studying how to process crude vegetable oils for fuel use. He also is studying which chemical and physical properties make the best fuel.

"We hope to find the processing steps that will make a high-quality substitute fuel," he said. Currently the research team is studying oil from sunflowers. They plan to move to other crops such as soybean, cottonseed and possibly animal fats.

Dr. Wayne LoPori, an agricultural engineer, is performing engine testing with oils prepared by Engler at the food protein center. Agricultural economists are studying feasibility of growing and processing vegetable oils for fuel.

If vegetable oil fuel ever becomes viable, Engler said, the exhaust will probably smell more like a deep-fat fryer than diesel.

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