Eye on inputs

By J.T. SMITH

STEVE Alabrook keeps a sharp eye on inputs at Alabrook Farms at Haskell, Texas. He writes his own spreadsheets from cotton to cattle gains, or any other commodity in the diverse farming operation, and plugs it in his input costs to figure his break-even prices.

Steve may be on his computers in his high-tech office doing everything from providing detailed spreadsheets to hedging crops, or finding the best deal on various production items, while wife Laura, who keeps the books, is somewhere in their farm home on her laptop computer.

Steve is a third-generation Texas farmer, and son Wesley, who farms on his own along with his father, represents the fourth generation. The crops include cotton, sorghum, safflower and wheat. In past ventures, Alabrook Farms has tried diversifying with soybeans and seedless watermelon.

But make no mistake, cotton is king. "Cotton is our cash crop," Steve asserts.

Big machinery, precision help

He and Wesley use big machinery with state-of-the-art technology to farm a large acreage of cotton. This includes using real-time kinematic guidance for field operations. RTK is the highest precision of GPS correction available today. But Steve doesn't use high-tech items just to be trendy if they don't pencil out.

This unconventional guy actually has gone back to almost 100% conventional cotton varieties. Of the collective cotton acreage Steve and Wesley grew for the 2010 crop year, about 80% is conventional cotton and only 20% is Roundup Ready cotton.

Key Points

- Steve Alabrook is well-known for keeping a close eye on input costs.
- Alabrook Farms uses both high-tech and conventional tools.
- Alabrook can control weeds and insects without transgenic cotton.

"We actually started moving out of transgenic cotton three years ago," Steve notes. He says he began to see glyphosate was no longer controlling Palmer amaranth or cardenless weed (aka pigweed) and suspected herbicide resistance. At that same time, he notes, transgenic cotton technology had become extremely expensive.

With the Rolling Plains Central Zone also functionally eradicated of boll weevils, Steve says he only deals with occasional thrips, flea hoppers or aphids now — all of which he can easily control. So he doesn't feel a need for transgenic cotton for insect control either.

Steve knows that not being "transgenic" sounds like blasphemy in today's cotton world.

But it's the high-tech equipment and some traditional herbicides that let him control weeds for clean fields. Curiously, he's able to do this without preplant incorporated, or so-called "yellow herbicides."

"We've found generic chemicals that work well for us in controlling both grass and broadleaf weeds," Steve says.

Read more about the Alabrook operation on Page 8.

CONVENTIONAL COTTON: Steve and Laura Alabrook use a wide variety of high-tech tools at Alabrook Farms at Haskell, Texas, but most of their cotton for 2010 was conventional varieties, like this Brinco cotton.
Sprinkle with rice

By CECIL H. YANCY JR.

BEFORE the use of flooding, rice farmers planted and then prayed for rain. Now, two irrigation companies are teaming up with RiceTec and land-grant universities in the Mid-South to explore more options for producers changing rice culture from flood to center-pivot irrigation.

Valley Irrigation calls its effort Circles for Rice. At the same time, Lindsay Irrigation is conducting research with rice under center pivots in Pakistan, Brazil and the U.S.

Farmers use center-pivot LEPA drop nozzles as a delivery system not only for water, but also for nutrition and control of weeds and insects. The irrigation rig wheels are equipped with tracks.

In the second year of on-farm trials in the U.S., center-pivot irrigation holds promise for reducing energy and water costs and opening land formerly excluded from rice because of land leveling considerations. Brazilian farmers have produced rice under center pivot for more than a decade.

Working out the kinks

"With rice under center-pivot irrigation, there are numerous agronomic and water management issues that have to be tied together," says Gene Stevens, University of Missouri Extension agronomist. Essentially, there are advantages and disadvantages to the system.

The first issue usually involves weed control. Jim Heiser, UM weed specialist, is in his third year of looking at the center-pivot system for weed control. He says the system lends itself easily to precision weed control with variable-rate applications. Lowerer weeds are visibly missing in this system. Chemicals, for both weeds and insects, are applied through the irrigation system. In a center-pivot system, the general rule is that you’ll apply more chemicals than in a flood system.

Since fertilizer can be applied through the center pivot, the rice can be sown-seeded nutrients, Stevens says. The system has led the irrigation firms down the path of additional precision with scheduling and monitoring. One experiment is measuring the temperature of the plants to determine when to irrigate.

Of the benefits, both companies and university researchers list water savings at the top of the list. In an on-farm test last year comparing center pivot to flood irrigation in Arkansas, Lindsay found a 21% reduction of water use with rice under center pivot, while harvesting similar yields. At one site, Valley had water savings approaching 50%. Cost savings at one Lindsay site in Arkansas showed a $108-per-acre savings.

Other benefits include minimal field preparation, as well as the ability to add rice to the crop rotation without land leveling. One farmer in Missouri tried rice for the first time in rotation without soybeans this year.

"Demand for water continues to increase across the globe," says Earl Voiers, Agricultural Research Service ag engineer at the Delta Research and Extension Center in Portageville, Mo. "This system may offer farmers a new way to grow rice on land not traditionally suited for rice, with less water than the flood system."

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