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Georgia Cotton

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How Late is Too Late to Plant? More Importantly, Regarding Crop Emergence Dates, How Late is Too Late to Pursue a Crop?

IT IS INADVISABLE TO ATTEMPT TO MAKE A CROP WITH COTTON THAT EMERGES AFTER JUNE 15 TO 20.

The drought of 2007 has brought countless challenges and questions to cotton producers across Georgia and the Southeast. By essentially every measure, the drought exceeds any in recent times. Its duration threatens the very feasibility of dryland production in many areas and the potential profitability of irrigated production in most ... unless weather patterns change significantly and soon.

May 31 marks the final planting date for “full coverage” for crop insurance purposes. A farmer who plants after May 31 diminishes his purchased level of coverage at a rate of one percent per day, and past June 15, coverage for cotton planted thereafter declines to 50 percent of his insured level. Assuming the seed is in the ground for at least 15 days, a grower can ask his insurance adjustor to inspect the crop 8 days after the last day of the late planting period; that is, 8 days after June 15, which is June 23. If no cotton is present on that date, the crop can be “zeroed out” and the claim finalized. If a settlement is made, any crop that emerges thereafter must be destroyed. If a crop is abandoned and counted as ZERO, a zero is calculated into a grower’s production history for his future yield basis.

A farmer who has a proper “prevented planting” claim is not compelled to plant after May 31. Claims must be filed within 72 hours after the May 31 deadline. Coverage for prevented planting is reduced to 50 percent of the purchased insurance level. If acreage is not planted due to prevented planting conditions, there is no effect on production history and yield basis.

Don Shurley provided detailed comments and examples on crop insurance considerations in his letter of May 22, 2007, posted on the UGA Cotton website. Study that for further reference.

There are many rules, regulations, and particulars regarding crop insurance. Growers should consult with crop insurance representatives to be sure about particular decisions. It is important to document planting practices, seed purchases, weather, etc.

Among the critical questions precipitated by the drought are (1) How late is too late to plant? and (2) Concerning emergence of a crop that comes up when it finally does rain, how late is too late to attempt to make a crop?

The Georgia Cotton Production Guide deals briefly with planting dates. Growers in South Georgia have successfully produced cotton planted over a wide window, ranging from early April to the first few days in June. Profitable production for June-planted cotton requires superb management and irrigation or timely rainfall. The last of these seems improbable at present. Late planting compresses the season and necessitates that there be no delays or interruptions in emergence, growth, fruiting, or maturity.

The life cycle of cotton requires certain heat unit accumulations and days between various phases of growth. The approximate time from emergence to squaring is 35 days, from squaring to bloom is 21 days, and from bloom to open boll is 50 days. Normal production involves a bloom period of at least 4 weeks. These approximations reflect patterns consistent with favorable growing conditions, not those plagued with serious drought/heat stress.

<i>Accumulations of Heat Units and Days between Various Cotton Growth Phases</i>			
	DD-60s	Total days (interval)	Calendar date
Planting to emergence	50	?	June 18
Emergence to squaring	550	35 (35)	July 23
Squaring to 1 st bloom	940	56 (21)	August 13
4 weeks of bloom	1700	84 (28)	September 10

As the drought persists, the possibility of making a dryland crop diminishes.

Hopefully, irrigated fields are planted by now. Unfortunately, crop establishment has been expensive – many producers have watered three to four times to achieve a stand. Peak water needs are associated with the flowering and boll-fill period, so once the crop is up and going, future irrigation can be delayed until a week or so before 1st bloom.

From the standpoint of production (beyond regulations of the crop insurance program), the real issue in non-irrigated fields is not when the crop is planted but when it emerges. Past some date it is impractical to attempt to make a crop. Arguably, that date is in mid to late June. Using the above numbers for the intervals required from emergence to bloom, adding the needed 4-week bloom period, and factoring in the historical number for the last effective flowering date as the first week of September, cotton that emerges after June 15 to 20 has minimal chance for success (see the table above). Present soil moisture conditions and short term weather forecasts amplify that position. Therefore, the conclusion:

It is inadvisable to pursue a crop that emerges after June 15 to 20.

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