**The Life of Cotton- A Moment in Agriculture Literacy**

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“Cotton is King” and Texas produces the most in the U.S. About 57% of cotton is used in clothing; more than a third in home furnishings and the rest is used in industrial products. There are three primary products that come from cotton production: cotton lint, cotton seed and linters. Cotton lint is the raw fiber that is pressed into bales. Cotton seed is about 2/3 of the cotton crop and is crushed into three products: oil, meal and hulls. Cottonseed oil is used in many products such as cooking oil. Cottonseed meal is high in protein and can be used in livestock feed. The hulls are used for feed, fertilizer and fuel. Linters are the short fibers that cling to the seed and they are used in plastics, cosmetics and paper products.

Before a farmer plants cotton, they must determine which variety to plant. There are many cotton traits a farmer needs to consider: if they want herbicide ready plants, what type of soil they have, if it is supposed to be a wet or dry year, is it pest resistant, what is their yield goals and is it disease resistant?

Cotton pest come in many forms, such as: wilts, blights and nematodes. Many people are familiar with is cotton root rot, which is caused by one of the most destructive fungal plant disease organisms, but it doesn’t affect certain plants, like grasses. Additional pests are: cotton aphids, stink bugs, thrips, spider mites and caterpillars. Having to treat for pests, diseases and weeds can become very expensive. Input costs are costs that help produce the cotton, such as: fertilizer, seed, pesticides, etc. Seed in 2015 cost about $102.7 per planted acre. Fertilizer was $86.94 and chemicals were $67.72 per planted acre. Everyone’s goal is to make money, thus farmers try to keep input costs low because the price of cotton can change quickly or if the weather changes there might not be any cotton to harvest. Cotton was trading for around $.70 a pound. Do you think you could farm cotton and make money off of $.70 cents a pound?

In Texas, cotton can be planted as early as February. If a farmer is using conventional tillage they will plow the land and get it ready to plant. Next, seeding is done with planters that can cover as many as 10 to 24 rows (32 to 76 feet wide) at a time. A row is wide enough for a tractor tire to get through to allow for the planter and other machinery to get through. The planter works by making a small trench and drops a certain amount of seeds in a row and covers them. Cotton’s growing season lasts about 150-180 days. Harvesting time in Texas starts in July and a picker machine or stripper machine is used. The cotton harvesting machines remove the part of the plant that looks like clouds or cotton balls (an open boll). After removing the cotton from the harvester it is placed in what looks like a giant loaf of bread, which is called a cotton module. The module can weigh up to 25,000 pounds and is moved to a gin to separate linters and seed from the cotton. After the seed has been removed the cotton is compressed into bales that weight about 500 pounds. A lot has changed since Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793 and a cotton gin today can process anywhere from 12-60 bales an hour. A bale of cotton can produce 215 jeans or 249 bed sheets. Cotton farmers have to look at many things to decide to sell now or wait and the price can change in a second. The U.S commonly supplies about 30% of the total world export market. Cotton is still King in some counties in Texas. Remember to take pride in agriculture and thank a farmer/rancher.

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