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Conserving water is key to Rolling Plains cotton

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Conserving irrigation water from the receding Seymour Aquifer is a big concern for Gary Tidwell who has a 2,500-acre cotton crop near Munday, Texas.

A fourth-generation farmer who produces wheat and milo in rotation with his cotton, Tidwell also runs stocker cattle on winter wheat pasture and maintains a cow herd.

Two thousand acres of Tidwell's 2009 cotton is growing under row irrigation fed by wells pulling water from the Seymour aquifer. Two hundred fifty acres of that crop obtains water from an underground drip irrigation system Tidwell installed to make his water go as far as possible.

"The Seymour aquifer is under a lot of pressure from irrigation in this area," Tidwell said. "The water level has fallen a lot in recent years. Installing the drip irrigation was an expensive deal, but it is paying off by helping us use less water to grow the cotton."

Along with row irrigation, Tidwell utilizes pivot irrigation systems to water cotton. He also has some dryland cotton.

Tidwell's entire crop is picker cotton. "We have found picker cotton varieties give us better yields and grades and it gins better for us," he said.

This year, Tidwell planted Stoneville 5458 and Deltapine 0935 and 0924, all Roundup Ready Flex varieties.

Tidwell's current cotton crop looks good, he says. "We still have several weeks to go before we harvest it," he said in mid October. "We had good weather and there are a lot of bolls on the plants."

In 2008, Tidwell's dryland cotton averaged a bale per acre or better. His irrigated cotton last year yielded from two and-a-half to three and-a-half bales per acre.

Tidwell, vice president of the Rolling Plains Cotton Growers Association, believes modern cotton farming gives him a good living, but says farmers have to face a lot of problems.

"We need water to make good yields," he said. "But our water resources are slowly disappearing while costs for pumping the water are increasing. The Rolling Plains Cotton Growers are working on these problems, but there is an increasing demand for the water by other users such as cities and industries in the area."

Another concern for Tidwell and the Rolling Plains Growers is the increasing cost of producing a crop.

"There are a lot of different demands made on our production costs," Tidwell said, "and not the least of these is the increasing cost of cotton seed. Roundup Ready Flex cotton varieties give us a tremendous tool to grow a crop of cotton. We have new, stacked gene varieties that help us combat weeds and that effectively stop plant diseases and insect problems, but they are very expensive. Roundup Ready Flex cottonseed now costs over \$300 per bag and the prices continue to escalate.

"Our association continues to negotiate with seed companies to find ways to keep seed prices as low as possible."

Tidwell and his wife, Nancy, are the labor force for their family farming operation. "We are partners in this deal," he said. "She takes care of the bookkeeping and I do the outside work. We have two children, Trent, who is in the Army stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., and our daughter, Toni, who is a nurse at the Lubbock, Texas, Health Sciences Center."

Tidwell is growing wheat for the second year in a no-till system. He strip tills dryland cotton. "We see advantages of no-till for retaining soil moisture and nutrients," he said. "On our irrigated acres, we rotate wheat with the cotton."

In his spare time, Tidwell works with his father, Garon, refurbishing old tractors. What began as a part-time hobby has grown significantly, he said.

"We have, in different levels of rebuilding, a John Deere 1933 B, a 1936 D, a 1940 L, a 1950 B and a 1936 WC Allis Chalmers," he said. "We are also rebuilding a 1947 Oliver 80.

"How we found the Oliver tractor is interesting," he said. "A neighbor who originally sold the tractor when it was new told us about it. We found it parked in a pasture completely surrounded with mesquite trees. In order to remove it, we had to spend time cutting the trees away from the tractor and making a trail to remove it from the pasture. The Oliver green paint coat was in pretty good shape."

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