

Timely Information: 2007 Drought Report
May 31, 2007
The Crops Team of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System

The end of the month of May marks the end of the planting season and crop insurance deadlines in Alabama for cotton, and, where applicable, peanuts. In addition, the 2007 corn crop should be well on its way to maturity. Time remains where soybeans planted in good growing conditions can be expected to produce a normal yield; however, 71% of the state's soybeans have already been planted, ahead of the long-term average.
http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Alabama/Publications/Crop_Progress_&_Condition/index.asp

The Agronomic Crops Team of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System has taken this time to comment on the condition of the 2007 and to project possible outcomes for this difficult season.

For the state as a whole, one word applies – drought. Many areas of the state did not receive measurable precipitation in May. Up-to-date rainfall information for specific sites can be obtained at the following URLs: <http://www.awis.com/mesonet/index.html>; and <http://www.ag.auburn.edu/xfer/alabamacotton/ddinformation.html>. In addition, soil moisture status for the nation can be viewed using the following map: <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/soilmst/>

The overall condition of Alabama row crops is poor. Corn, the first crop planted in the spring, has suffered from frost and drought. Yield prospects at this point are very poor for dryland corn. While the USDA Crop Condition Report has cotton planting at about 80% complete, roughly half the state's cotton was “dusted in”, planted in soil without adequate moisture to germinate the seeds. This cotton, representing about half the state's acreage, is especially at risk. If these fields receive enough rain to swell the seeds but not enough to allow the cotton to emerge, the plants will die. If the rain packs the soil surface so that a crust forms that the plants cannot penetrate, the plants will die. Both cotton and peanut planting has virtually ceased as of this writing because of dry soil to a depth of eight to 10 inches across the state.

Alabama is climatologically a very diverse state, and some parts of the state are in much worse shape than other parts. The following summary by regional extension agents, county extension coordinators, and crop specialists is the best way to illustrate the impact of this drought.

In the East-Central region, Leonard Kuykendall reports that from Montgomery County Northeast to Choccolocco Creek in Talladega County, all the corn, most of the cotton and about 35% of the peanuts have been planted. No soybeans have been planted due to lack of soil moisture. About 25% of the cotton has emerged and produced a “stand”. Overall the crop condition is described as very poor due to drought stress.

Rudy Yates reports similar conditions in Alabama's Black-Belt region with the exception that peanut planting is farther along. He also reports that water levels in creeks and rivers are very low, and that even farmers with irrigation may suffer the effects of drought as the failing water supplies prevent pumping.

Further north, in West-Central Alabama, Warren Griffith reports cotton and soybean planting 80% completed, but the corn crop is small for its age, and yellowing with a lot of leaf curl due to lack of water. Warren further reports that cotton emergence has been spotty, that the emerged plants have suffered heavy thrips pressure, and that some plants have actually died after emergence, an extremely rare event.

In the Sand Mountain area, David Derrick reports that the corn is wilted every morning by 9 AM, and that about 10 more days without rain will "finish this crop". He reports that farmers have stopped side dressing fertilizer on the corn to cut their losses. Cotton planting is nearly complete at 90%, but that the area received between 0.2 and 0.4 inches of rain, which has been enough to sprout the seeds but not enough to produce a viable plant. Also, cotton less than 2 inches tall is wilting in the daytime heat. Farmers stopped planting soybeans, still an important crop in this area, about 2 weeks ago with only 60% of the crop planted.

In Northwest Alabama, Heath Potter and Tim Reed report that most corn is about waist high and is twisting up on weaker and marginal land. Farmers in the area who can irrigate have been irrigating for 3 weeks. In fact, some farmers had to irrigate corn for 10 days before the Easter freeze event just to get corn up. He also reports that the cotton that has been planted is small with a very few true leaves. Heavy insect pressure from false chinch bugs and thrips has caused farmers to spray more than usual, but the cotton has not shown severe drought symptoms to this point. Soybean planting has begun but one farmer with 300 acres planted reported that he wished they were still in the bag. The farmer is quoted as saying "we have ragged stands on what has been planted and severe drought symptoms are beginning to show up. At this time we will not consider planting soybeans behind our wheat without rain". Another farmer reported he was unable to plant soybeans following wheat cut for hay because the ground was too hard for the planter to penetrate the surface. The 2006 drought cut yields to very near 50% of normal on dry land crops in this area, so farmers are already strapped financially.

In the central Tennessee Valley, Charles Burmester reports that the NOAA Weather Service records indicate the area has received 10 inches of rain so far this year, which is 15 inches less than normal. Cotton acreage in the region is estimated to be 45% below average, much cotton having been replaced by corn due to the current price differential between the two crops. Most of the cotton has been planted is at the 1-4 leaf stage, but growth has slowed greatly this week. Thrips pressure has increased making the drought problem worse. Rains have been few and far between. About 75% of the corn in the area had to be replanted due to the Easter freeze. That corn is now at the 5 to 7 leaf stage and is showing daily drought stress in the afternoon heat. Soybean planting has stopped in most areas, at about 30-40% planted and what has emerged looks about like the cotton; small, with thrips damage.

In the Wiregrass, Jimmy Jones reports very dry conditions. He reports that much of the cotton was “dusted in” and has not had any rainfall since planting, but that in general the early plantings have emerged. However, no moisture exists in the soil and the small plants are being attacked by insects, weeds and dry weather. In a nutshell, “We are some 40 inches of rainfall behind at this point for 06/07 and it is showing in everything from fruits to peanuts to pastures. This may be the coming of the worst drought disaster we have seen in 100 years.”

Finally, in the Gulf counties, Richard Petcher, Buck Farris, and Jim Todd report that the drought there is serious but that it does not seem to be as severe, in general, as in other areas of Alabama. Peanuts and cotton are 75-80% planted and mostly emerged but “dusting in” is still an issue. Wheat and oats are being harvested with most growers reporting excellent yields. The corn crop is suffering from the drought and heat, but if rains come soon growers still have a chance for normal yields. Some of the remaining cotton and peanut acres will likely be planted to soybeans. Only 10 % of the 9,000 acre soybean crop is already planted, and most soybeans were to be planted following wheat harvest. Further north in the region, however, the drought is as severe as anywhere in the state. In Butler County, while the corn has been planted and is doing amazingly well, no cotton and peanuts have been planted. There is some hope still of getting the peanuts planted, if rain comes in time, but no cotton will likely be planted this year.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System Crops Team

Members who contributed to this report can be reached at their cell phone numbers below or through the Extension Service Staff Directory at <http://www.aces.edu/directory/>

Charles Burmester – Cotton Specialist (256) 303-7407
William Birdsong – Extension Specialist (334) 726-6801
Dennis Delaney – Soybean and Conservation Tillage Specialist (334) 744-4117
David Derrick – REA Sand Mountain (256) 458-8890
Olin Farris – CEC Escambia County (251) 238-2101
Bob Goodman – Extension Agricultural Economist (334) 321-8732
Warren Griffith – REA West-Central Alabama (205) 442-1387
Jimmy Jones – CSC Henry County (334) 726-1804
Leonard Kuykendall – REA Central Alabama (334) 850-7062
Dale Monks – Cotton Specialist (334) 728-5487
Richard Petcher – REA Southwest Alabama (334) 539-2133
Heath Potter – REA Northwest Alabama (256) 476-8885
Tim Reed – CEC Franklin County (256) 627-3450
Jim Todd – CEC Mobile County (251) 581-0342
Rudy Yates – REA Black-Belt (334) 422-1135