

Cotton Defoliation "Thoughts"

By: Peyton Sapp, County Extension Coordinator

For release week of September 1, 2010

New cotton varieties continue to make us think carefully about management of the crop, in particular at this time of year defoliation. Since we typically have a long growing season and a variety that was later maturing, farmers have been tempted to delay defoliation to try and let as many bolls as possible mature. Often times this decision decreases the quality of the cotton harvested.

This year (not unlike years past) it appears that cotton and peanuts will be ready for harvest around the same time. Both crops will be competing for the labor and machinery resources. This is another temptation to delay cotton defoliation and or harvest. Question is, how long can we expect to wait to harvest cotton before significant damage / loss in quality is realized?

A cotton plant will open bolls for a period of approximately 6 weeks. Some bolls will be open while others continue to mature. The objective of crop termination is to apply harvest aids at such a time that as many bolls as possible can be harvested (can contribute to yield and income) without suffering offsetting losses in yield and quality due to weathering and delay in harvest of bolls already mature. According to UGA data cotton income should be maximized by timely defoliation and harvest at 60 to 80% open bolls. Based on the 3 years data from 1998-2000, this would likely result in highest average yield, improved color grade, improved fiber length uniformity, higher fiber Strength, and lower Short Fiber Content. This study can be found at http://commodities.caes.uga.edu/fieldcrops/cotton/Qual_Def.pdf

Given the unpredictable nature of our weather, harvest field conditions and now new varieties; it is more critical than ever to carefully consider when to defoliate cotton. If you would like more information on cotton defoliation or related information, contact the Burke County Extension Office at (706)554-2119.