

May 18, 1998

MiteFax San Joaquin Valley Cotton

Early Season '98

As one chemical company rep put it last Thursday, "This is the longest February I've ever seen."

While he was exaggerating, the rep's remark doesn't stretch the truth by much. Weather conditions that are common in late winter and early spring continue to linger into the second half of May. Somewhat higher temperatures may develop, but a slight chance of rain was in the weekend forecast for part of the valley. Also, a new storm could move into the region by mid-week.

Temperatures may go up, but no dramatic warming trends are projected through the end of the month. Plant development has stalled. About the only thing that's growing right now is anxiety.

On Friday, we contacted a dozen PCAs and Extension workers for their observations. Instead of our usual format with individual reports from each of our contacts, we are starting the 1998 MiteFax publishing season with an over-

We will begin posting our MiteFax heat unit table in next week's issue.

view.

Crop Conditions: Most of the emerged crop is in the cotyledon to two true-leaf stage. In the southern valley, it's possible to find scattered fields with 4-inch plants.

"My notes from May 15, 1997, show we had plenty of cotton with 5-6 true leaves and a field with 8-9 leaves and occasional squaring," notes Galen Hiatt, a Fresno independent PCA. "A year later, I don't have anything past two leaves, and a good deal still is cotyledon."

Chris Morgner, PCA with Agri-Valley Consulting in Merced, says: "We're in uncharted waters right now with cotton and other crops. We haven't had to deal with conditions like this." Heat unit accu-

mulation on his earliest plantings are half the historic norm.

Depending on the area, 80-98% of the intended acres are planted. How much more can be seeded remains a question. The season has moved past optimum planting dates, but growers with contracts or lack of alternatives will continue planting, PCAs and Extension workers say.

"There will be a lot of planting as soon as conditions are halfway suitable," says Jerry Anderson, PCA, Anderson consulting in Dos Palos. "Some growers have contracted 2 bales an acre, and they don't have a choice."

Not all his growers' intended acres will be planted, says Warren Hutchings, PCA and sales manager with Calarco in Corcoran. "Very few will plant 100% of what they planned, and in some cases it may be 50-80%."

There were reports of a grower

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on the West Side dragging bars behind ATVs to knock caps off emerging plants that were mired in the mud. Plantings in the mud in heavier soils in the northern SJV also were reported.

Diseases: Seedling disease already is affecting some fields, and more cold weather makes it a greater concern, PCAs and Extension workers reported.

Dan Buchak, PCA, Gillespie Ag Service in Porterville, says his stands are not at a "crisis stage yet, but we do need sunshine and warmer weather."

Nick Groenenberg, independent PCA in Hanford, reports: "Root disease has become prolific in the last 10 days. When cool weather hit (after the first of the month) the problem really picked up."

Even if stands aren't lost, weakened root systems already are setting up a large part of the crop for lower yield potential. And PCAs expect some fields to be abandoned because of diseases and poor stand establishment. The amount plowed down will depend on how long it takes for temperatures to rebound.

Pest pressure: Poor root development also sets up plants for increased susceptibility to mites

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and insects. Mites aren't reported in cotton, but a cool, wet start and low mite pressure early does not automatically lead to low mite pressure later. Several PCAs point to 1995 when cold spring weather dampened early mites, but heavy pressure hit later in the season.

Close scouting will be necessary with this crop's poor start.

"The reduced root system will compromise the plant's ability to compensate throughout the season," says James Brazzle, Extension entomology advisor in Kern County.

Rainfall also could be prepping the valley for heavy lygus pressure. While it will be important to protect early positions from sustained populations, Brazzle and Extension IPM Advisor Pete Goodell stress a cautious treatment approach.

"Early square loss isn't necessarily due to lygus, and we need to see lygus before spending money," says Brazzle.

Earlier positions tend to be more delicate, and after all the cold weather the plants may not be able to hold as high a percentage, even without lygus, Goodell says.

"If 60% is the best the plant can do, you can't reach 80% retention, no matter how much you treat," says Goodell. "If lygus are clearly reducing retention, that's a different situation. But our first problem this year is a lack of heat units, and you can't spray sunshine."

While some lygus populations may move out of the foothills, Goodell believes that problems also could develop in weeds that now are growing abundantly along roadsides and in idled fields.

How to manage this

crop: Because growers tended to use higher seeding rates this season, stand densities remain generally good, says Bob Hutmacher, Extension cotton specialist. How weather conditions trend before June 1 will influence whether populations remain good or stands become spotty, he says.

"This isn't the kind of year to have a big plant," says Hutmacher. "Decisions about irrigation, fertilizer treatments and Pix will be critical."

The considerable rainfall so far may replace the first irrigation on part of the valley's crop, he says.

Bob Ritchie, a grower and PCA-manager for Simplot in Delano, says any fertilizer treatments he makes this season "will be very light" and he plans to pack fields to reduce moisture infiltration.

Cotton Inc./Extension meetings:

A reminder: Cotton Incorporated and the state Extension service are sponsoring pest and crop management meetings this week at the Harris Ranch on Tuesday and at the Holiday Inn at the Bakersfield convention center on Wednesday. Registration begins at 7:30 a.m. and meetings start at 8:30 a.m. Lunch is provided. To preregister, call Bob Hutmacher's office at: 805-746-8020.