

Field Notes:

August 25, 2008

Fay will change crop prospects.

By: Ernie Flint, Ph.D., CCA, Area Agent-Agronomic Crops
Mississippi State University Extension Service

The hurricane that was named Fay as it meandered across Florida seems bent on having its path cross ours as I am writing on this rainy Saturday afternoon. We've heard the reports about large amounts of rain as Fay visited our neighbors in Florida and Georgia. Now downgraded to a tropical storm, it is dropping a steady rain onto Alabama and Mississippi. While most of the wind seems bound for regions near the Gulf Coast, Central Mississippi will likely receive significant rain. Hopefully, we will be able to avoid most of the wind.

Crops are now in varied stages of development, mostly resulting from the difficult planting period we experienced this year. Corn, soybeans, and cotton that were planted at their normal times are nearing maturity. These older crops have been exposed to heavy rainfall during the past two weeks; and it appears that we will receive several more inches. Fields have already been wetted to the saturation point; and this rain will lead to more waiting before fields can be entered with harvesting equipment.

In the case of corn, some areas have made significant progress with harvesting, while others are just beginning. In the area I serve in Central Mississippi, approximately ten to fifteen percent of the corn crop has been harvested, but only in localized areas. Combines started in other areas yesterday (Friday) and today; but most grain moisture is still a little high for delivery to elevators and feed mills. This year, more growers are harvesting at high moisture and drying in the bins. Reports on yields and quality have generally been good. A few localized areas had experienced wind damage and lodging prior to Fay's arrival.

As rains move across mature corn fields, farmers are concerned that grain quality may decline; however we are going into this in reasonably good condition. If this storm moves through gently without significant wind, and is followed by a period of cool dry air the damage should be minimal. At the moment, this scenario seems likely; however these things have "minds" of their own as we Southerners know only too well.

Soybeans that are still actively growing and setting pods will likely benefit from the rain. Disease pressure in soybeans has been lighter than usual, and should not be a big problem. Insects had begun to develop in some soybean fields as this storm system approached, and quite a few growers made control applications within the last three to four days for stinkbugs, loopers, alfalfa leafhoppers, and leaf beetles. Highest pest populations are in the Delta region, with only a few questionable situations in the Hills.

Soybeans that were planted early, and that are now dropping leaves are vulnerable to weather damage in the form of pod and stem rot. Areas that suffered most during the dry period, and where charcoal rot developed, will now be most susceptible to weather damage. A few growers have made a second application of fungicide to suppress pod rotting fungi. This is a difficult call since production costs have already exceeded many budgets.

The most mature cotton began opening in the lower portion of plants about two weeks ago. Some of these fields might have been defoliated next week if weather had remained good; but this work is now on hold until weather clears and temperatures get back to normal. Grades will probably be reduced on cotton from these fields. Much of the younger cotton that was planted near the end of May was caught in a critical stage of blooming and setting bolls. Many valuable blooms have been shed; and the number of good "cotton growing" days is decreasing rapidly. A yield reduction is likely in these later fields unless we have a "miracle" fall period of excellent weather.

For now, about all we can do is watch the rain, make last-minute preparations, rest, and pray for good weather. One thing we know is that worrying does not help. Worrying only weakens us for the time when we will need every ounce of strength we possess. Thanks for your time.