

**In General:**

As usual, I'm having trouble getting used to writing 2010 instead of 2009. It's amazing how fast the years have gone by; and the thing that some may consider odd is that it's getting to be more fun every year. One of my early evaluations contained the note that I was spending too much time writing and too little having meetings; but as time has gone by I have found that writing is more effective. Thanks to all of you out there who read these pages, whether for information or to see what strange ideas I've had.

Meetings are fine when you have something new and enlightening to say; but these days it's difficult to figure out just how we are going to continue farming, let alone what new stuff we can do. Instead of trying to find new ways to do things, most of you are trying to decide what things you will stop doing in order to stay in business. The answer is to trim where it affects your profitability least. That's very easy to say; but doing it is quite another matter. For most of us, moving forward this year will be a lot like eating an elephant. The only way to get it done is one bite at a time.

This letter will attempt to answer some of the questions that I have been asked in the last few weeks. I may step on a few toes in the process; but it won't be the first time. A couple of years ago, a technical rep with a large company who did not particularly like something that I either said or did not say commented that I should have all of these letters reviewed by what would have amounted to a panel of "peers". I think all of you know how that would work – I would be lucky to get the January letter done by July. Come to think of it, I'm still not quite sure what he meant by "peers". That word really did not transition very well from Latin to English.

**Cotton:**

Historical market data is difficult to find; but if I worked at it long enough I could probably come up with a chart that would show recent price trends for cotton, corn, and soybeans on the same page. I actually tried to find this; but it seems that the market is most concerned with where we are today rather than how we arrived. However, if that chart does exist somewhere it will show that cotton has made a fairly significant improvement in price during recent weeks, while corn and soybeans remain in the doldrums or worse. Cotton is still not trading in the eighty cent range that many say they must have; but it has already broken through several imaginary barriers. The eighty cent barrier may also fall, especially if producers don't bite too hard on the low seventies as the mills probably hope they will.

It appears that there may be enough new interest in cotton to boost acreage somewhat from last year's crop. This follows on the heels of the fact that many growers were not able to plant the cotton they had planned for last year. The South Texas drought took a big bite out of last year's potential crop. Yields also fell in many localities in 2009, further depleting the supply of stored cotton. I expect that quite a few fields will return to cotton, but without some eye-opening price increases before planting time the increase may still be less than ginners need to keep all the wheels turning.

One bright spot in cotton is that a new textile mill has opened in Louisiana, at Lacassine. This facility is one of two that are planned by Zagis USA to be built in Louisiana. The company projects that when the two mills are completed and running they will use 15 to 20 percent of the Louisiana cotton crop. This is surprising since Lacassine is in the heart of Louisiana rice country; however it's a lot closer than China.

Variety selection is probably not as big a concern for cotton as for the other crops because of the reduced acreage; but with questionable interest in the crop we can expect demand for seed to center on those varieties with the best records. I know that some people may question the reasoning for considering 2009 yield data since conditions were so different from the norm; however I believe the best performers in 2009 were generally in the upper levels of tests in 2008 and earlier. The confusion comes in when you get down into the pack of “also ran”

varieties that are generally good but are rarely at the top. Some of these varieties that rarely fall into the top five may have special characteristics that fit specific situations; but probably will not gain wide acceptance. I sent you the results of my trials in the Nov.-Dec. issue, so I am including the top ten Delta and Hills performers in the statewide trials. The complete tests and economic data for the trials are available on the msucares.com website. Call me if you need help finding it.

#### Delta – Average from five locations in 2009 - Preliminary

Variety	Lint Yield <sup>2</sup> lb/a	Lint Percent %	Seed Index g	Boll Size g	Length inch	Uniformity Index %	Strength g/tex	Elongation %	Micronaire mic
PHY 485 WRF	1239	39.48	10.12	5.08	1.19	85.94	30.87	8.01	4.95
DP 0949 B2RF	1235	42.32	9.67	4.91	1.21	85.73	28.78	7.29	5.00
PHY 370 WR	1226	41.33	10.57	5.31	1.17	85.38	30.99	7.44	4.90
DP 174 RF	1177	42.97	10.30	5.73	1.24	86.20	27.80	7.07	4.67
ST 5458 B2RF--CK	1165	40.63	10.81	5.51	1.21	85.42	30.53	7.05	5.21
ST 4288 B2F	1161	38.72	11.30	5.82	1.22	85.77	29.17	7.10	5.09
ST 5288 B2F	1144	40.98	9.39	5.22	1.21	85.69	28.86	7.21	4.96
PHY 565 WRF	1141	41.93	9.71	4.72	1.23	86.39	31.45	7.76	4.63
DP 0912 B2RF	1138	40.06	10.09	5.19	1.17	85.18	28.86	7.41	5.31
FM 1740 B2F	1129	41.48	10.85	5.41	1.21	86.15	29.84	6.99	4.83

#### Hills – Average from four locations in 2009 – Preliminary

Variety	Lint Yield <sup>2</sup> lb/a	Lint Percent %	Seed Index g	Boll Size g	Length inch	Uniformity Index %	Strength g/tex	Elongation %	Micronaire mic
PHY 370 WR	942	41.37	10.33	5.44	1.12	85.24	27.77	6.92	4.49
DP 174 RF	922	43.01	10.09	5.87	1.22	86.05	26.07	6.73	4.39
FM 1740 B2F	895	40.82	10.86	5.72	1.18	86.15	27.07	6.57	4.46
DP 0949 B2RF	873	41.78	9.89	4.96	1.17	85.16	25.99	6.76	4.56
ST 5288 B2F	870	40.53	9.82	5.37	1.18	85.14	26.71	6.77	4.52
PHY 485 WRF	862	39.63	10.14	5.04	1.17	85.85	28.09	7.40	4.63
PHY 425 RF	853	38.67	10.27	5.29	1.18	86.01	28.48	7.40	4.80
DP 0912 B2RF	844	39.84	10.15	5.24	1.13	85.29	27.46	6.83	4.81
PHY 565 WRF	842	40.73	10.06	4.83	1.21	86.28	29.06	7.04	4.27
ST 5458 B2RF--CK	813	39.57	10.66	5.58	1.19	85.31	28.62	6.49	4.61

We noticed something very interesting this year as grades started coming back from the reduced number of bales. Grades were good in general; but one very different thing showed up. Many of the fiber length numbers were above 1.12 which is also expressed as a 36. There were many 37 values which is the same as 1.16. And I saw something that I do not recall seeing in the past – several 38 length values, which is also expressed as 1.19. You can see this in the statewide trial results above, although the trial samples were ginned on a laboratory gin that can't be expected to duplicate a full sized gin plant. One variety that was out of the running for the top ten yielders produced a 1.28 or 40 length and a strength reading of over 33. Test plot sample grade results are sometimes questionable; however the results from actual bale samples carry more weight. I really don't expect us to see this kind of thing in a normal year; but this suggests that when plants are subjected to the kinds of conditions we had in 2009 they may respond by maturing less lint but higher quality. This is just another thing that continues to show how very complex cotton plants are.

One thing I hope cotton producers will consider this year is the idea of reducing nitrogen rates. I would be happy with rates of around 70 to 75 pounds per acre of N under otherwise good field conditions, especially in the Hills without irrigation. However I would be happy to see those who apply 130 pounds or more reduce their rate down to 100 to reduce the need for so much PGR, to reduce attractiveness for insects, and to increase early fruit retention. Reduced N will also promote earliness and simplify defoliation. I know that some will chuckle and say that I will also reduce yields; but don't say that too loud if you have not tried it. I realize that some who irrigate may be able to utilize higher rates under intensive management; but most of the fields in this area could benefit from reduced N.

#### **Corn:**

My phone has been steadily ringing during this last week of January; and many of the calls have been about corn variety selection. Seed companies are talking about shortages of some of our best performing varieties; and the

race is on to get these booked even though many people don't yet know what their cropping mix may look like at planting time.

Seed prices are up again, even though yields were down last year. It should be apparent to farmers that those who set prices have little regard for farm profitability. Their goal is to show more dividends for stockholders. I suppose that farmers need to buy stock in seed companies and apply the dividends to their seed costs. Some probably have done this already.

I have a few favorite varieties that have impressed me on your farms and in my trials over the last few years. We already have a list of suggested corn varieties that is based on the results of county and MAFES trials from all over the state. My list is very similar to it; so I'm not going to confuse the issue by doing another list.

We have a few exceptional corn hybrids, a few more that are almost as good that may actually win trials at times. Then there is a group of good varieties that will perform very well; but just can't seem to ring the bell. There are then a few to avoid. We really don't need to list these; but if someone tries to sell you a variety that does not show up in the suggested list, is not in at least the upper half of the MAFES overall average table; and especially if you have not seen it in a trial anywhere, then please avoid it until we can look for a good source of data on it. Production costs are too high to risk planting a hybrid that has a questionable track record. I have sent these results and lists to you already; but if you need copies let me know.

#### **Soybeans:**

A lot of people are reluctant to plant soybeans after last year's experience; but if prices get attractive we should plant them. It's as simple as that. Every year must stand on its own two feet; and we are starting a new year that will likely have a different set of conditions. It's difficult to accept that for the past two years our latest plantings have been our best. It could happen again; but the probability is that our standard planting methods will again be best.

My favorite planting situation is to plant a proven late Group 4 (4.6 to 4.9) during the last two weeks of April. However, last year has

caused many of you to lean toward the early to mid Group 5 (5.0 to 5.5) varieties as a way of delaying maturity. I agree this moves the bean harvest a little further away from the bulk of the “usual” corn harvest; but last year showed that even our best laid plans can go awry.

#### **Wheat:**

Wheat is getting a very poor start. Some fields are just now getting to the point that stand counts can be made to decide whether to stay with wheat or to destroy and plant other crops. Saturated soils, freezing and long periods of cold weather have held back plant development. However, wheat can develop rapidly when temperatures increase, days get longer, and fields drain out and let oxygen into the soil.

Most fields have high levels of broadleaf weeds and annual bluegrass (Poi annual). Most have at least a few clumps of ryegrass. Weed competition should be eliminated as soon as possible; and nitrogen should be made available to get plants growing with the very first warm days. If you are scratching your head about wheat give us a call. Every field is different.

#### **Soil Fertility and Drainage:**

I am combining these since they are dependent on one another. This is a tough year for any form of expense in growing a crop. I have never understood why many people tend to think first of cutting expense with soil fertility rather than somewhere else. When fertility is used as a cost cutting method the result is often carried directly to bottom line profitability since yields and quality are reduced.

There are situations where nutrient levels are high, and you can reduce expense by allowing the crop to use some of the stored supply; but if this philosophy is allowed to go too far it can lead to long term problems. Only reduce rates based on the best information you can get, including soil tests and actual yield data.

We have again allowed drainage to get the best of us. In our rush to get the crop harvested we plugged drains, made ruts that are now full of water; and generally made a mess. This will cost us in delayed planting, increased field preparation costs, and the possibility of

erratic stands and a poor start for this year’s crop.

#### **In Conclusion:**

I could come up with analogies for how tough things are; and how we need to persevere in spite of all the negative feelings carried over from last year, and all the built-up problems of low profitability for the last few years. But none of that would make any difference. I might tell a couple of funny stories that would bring a grin to a few faces; but that would be temporary.

No amount of rhetoric or jokes will help now. We are nearing the time when people of this nation will have to decide whether they want agriculture or not. If they don’t, we had just as well go fishing until they change their minds – which they ultimately will. A good fishing trip might not be a bad idea anyway. I haven’t done much of that since I was a kid; maybe it’s time to go back for a while. You and I know it’s not that simple; but the thought feels good doesn’t it? Whether you believe it or not, a door will be opened for us before long. Be patient if you can. Call me if you go fishing – I might go with you.

Sincerely,



Ernest H. Flint, Ph.D., CCA, Area Agronomist  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

#### **Events:**

February 9: Private Applicator Training at Winona Extension Office – 6PM.

February 11: Cotton Production Seminar and Discussion, Vaiden Library - 6PM.

February 25: Private Applicator Training at Carrollton Extension Office – 6PM