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Perseverance, efficiency are keys for SW High Cotton winner

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Eric Seidenberger made his first cotton crop back in 1994 and when he went to see his banker to settle up after harvest, the loan officer looked at Eric's cotton check and asked: "Is this all there is?"

Eric assured him that it was, indeed, the total income from his cotton crop.

The banker took another look at the check and another look at Eric and asked: "Have you thought about trying something else?"

He had not — and 16 years later, after harvesting more than 2,000 acres of Glasscock County, Texas, cotton, he says he's never regretted not following the banker's advice.

His perseverance in the face of discouragement and a few *less than stellar* crop years, has put Seidenberger among an elite list of Southwest cotton farmers — winner of the Farm Press/Cotton Foundation High Cotton Award for the Southwest region.

Seidenberger started small, leasing land where he could, and for the first few crops using some of his father's tractors and equipment.

"Dad [Dennis] still farms his own land, as he has for 43 years," Eric says.

"Our operations are totally separate, but we talk a lot about our crops. If not

for his help and advice, and the use of his equipment during the tough early years, I wouldn't be where I am today.”

Without help from family, many young farmers today have little chance of getting started, he says. “And it's twice as expensive now as it was when I started.”

Seidenberger is farming 2,950 acres — 2,150 in cotton, the rest in wheat, and also grazes Angus cattle on 3,000 acres of pasture. He irrigates 1,225 acres, 1,000 with subsurface drip, has a 125-acre pivot, and furrow waters 100 acres. He plans to put in another 100 acres of drip for the 2011 season.

Drip irrigation, reduced tillage, terracing and grassed waterways are critical parts of his production and conservation programs.

He installed his first drip irrigation in 2003, a 45-acre block. He says drip offers three distinct advantages:

High Yields: “I get high yields from my drip irrigated cotton,” he says, noting that yield consistency with drip is a huge advantage. His yield goal for dryland production is one bale per acre; he hopes to get 2.5 bales per acre with pivot and furrow irrigation; and aims for 3 to 4 bales on drip fields. He's made 2,000 pounds on some fields and qualified for the FiberMax one-ton club four years in a row. He's on the bubble for 2010.

Water use efficiency: “I average 95 percent efficiency with drip, compared to furrow water, which has about 50 percent efficiency,” he says.

Water use efficiency is a huge advantage with subsurface drip, he says. “Water is always an issue for West Texas farmers. We're supplying supplemental water and our water table is dropping some every year. We were getting to the point with furrow irrigation that we couldn't get water all the way to the end of the rows.”

After he put in the first 45-acre system, he added 450 more acres the following year. “We still were not seeing the labor benefit with that little bit — we still needed labor for the furrow systems.”

Less labor: The main advantage of drip, Seidenberger says, is labor savings. “We were moving pipe all day long for furrow irrigation. We’re also using less tillage on drip irrigated fields; we aren’t cultivating four or five times in the summer, as we do with furrow irrigation. We spray Roundup early and cultivate once.”

With almost all his cotton now drip irrigated, the labor toll is much less. “We get everything done — until harvest — with just two full-time laborers.”

Multiple cultivations was once a labor-intensive routine, and less tillage also saves labor, Seidenberger says. “We would cultivate in furrows for the water and cultivate six or seven times during the summer. With drip, we’re down to one cultivation. On furrow irrigation, we still cultivate three or four times.”

Terraces and waterways

The next 100 acres of drip will go on pivot irrigated fields, Seidenberger says. “We’ll maintain some furrow-irrigation in bottom land that’s prone to wash with heavy rains. Some acreage we have to leave out of drip because of potential erosion. We’ve added terraces and grassed waterways.”

Bottom land and rolling fields are prone to erosion, “So, we need waterways and terraces on 90 percent of our bottom land. We’ve grassed most of our waterways.”

One pivot field has a 19-foot drop from one end to the other, and “We have to maintain erosion control in that field. Before we built waterways, we got a six-inch rain one night that washed out 90 percent of our beds. The field was totally flat. I knew I needed waterways; they’ve made a ton of difference.”

Terraces direct water to one central waterway and into a nearby creek. “Conservation just makes good sense,” he says. “We have a lot of rolling land in the Garden City area and it needs erosion control.”

Seidenberger has adopted other technology to improve efficiency. Transgenic seed play an important role in his production. He plants PhytoGen 375 WRF and 440W and FiberMax 9160, 9170 and 1740, all BGII varieties.

“I also plant a test plot for Delta and Pine Land. I’ve done that for 15 years. And I switch varieties every year or two — varieties change fast as they develop new technology.”

Fertility

Technology also helps maintain an efficient fertility program, Seidenberger says. “Fertility is especially important in drip irrigation. We knife in 200 pounds of 10-34-0-5 to get phosphorus in before planting.”

On dryland, moisture may dictate fertility. “If we have moisture we try to knife in a high nitrogen blend — that’s all it will get.”

Furrow and pivot systems get the same pre-plant fertility as drip, but furrow-irrigated fields don’t get in-season nitrogen applications. “We inject nitrogen through the pivot and drip systems. We’ve used pretty much the same thing for the past six years, but we’re looking at soil samples, accompanied by petiole testing to determine how much to inject. We want to see if we can save a little on fertilizer.”

He’s also considering variable rate application technology to further refine his fertility program. “I’m working with Helena to knife in fertilizer, using a Veris Rig as a base for pre-plant fertility. I want to do more with variable rate application; I’m just getting started.”

He uses some aerial imagery to improve efficiency of plant growth regulators and harvest aids with variable rate aerial applications. “Then we’ll add yield monitors and field maps to identify soils that need more fertilizer.”

GPS is crucial

Seidenberger uses global positioning technology to install drip irrigation systems, too. “All my drip tape except the first 45 acres was installed with the RTK system. We still use that system when we work that field, but we have to adjust for it.”

He uses ECO Drip for subsurface drip irrigation materials and Netafim tape and filters.

He relies on GPS for more than just installing drip tape. “If the RTK goes down while I’m planting a drip-irrigated field, I shut down. We have to be exactly on the row when we pick six rows at a time. It also helps to water precisely when you are right on the tapes.”

Some of Seidenberger’s tape is spaced 80 inches between rows and some is on 40-inch spacing under the row.

“If I were doing it all over, I’d put it all 40 inches under the row. That spacing takes about half as much water and gets moisture to the top easier. I could farm flat with the narrow spaces. But the 40-inch tape spacing is quite a bit more expensive to install because there is more drip tape in the fields.”

Water savings

Pre-watering to plant on 40-inch spacings takes as little as 4 inches of water, Seidenberger says. With 80-inch spaces, he may need 10 inches of pre-watering in a dry year to get the beds wet on both sides of the tape.

Most of his wells supply from 2 to 3 gallons per minute per acre. “Three gallons provides 15/100 inch per day for the crop. During peak moisture demand — blooming — cotton uses 3/10 inch a day. So during blooming, we are only giving the plant half of the water it needs every day. We just hope we keep enough moisture in the soil profile to get us through or get a rain.”

He says 5 to 6 gallons per minute per acre is “ideal for drip irrigation to provide cotton all the water it needs through the season. We’re always behind — sometimes rain catches us up, but in-season we run the system all the time to stay where we need to be. Some farmers are using 1.5 to 2 gallons per minute per acre and still making good yields.”

Good year

His 2010 crop was a little off from 2009, Seidenberger says; it was hurt by a too-wet June and early July and a too-dry August. Still, with a combination of good yields and excellent price, he expects a good cotton year. And he’ll soon be busy getting ready to make his next crop.

Busy as he is, Seidenberger still manages to give back to his industry, his family and his community. He serves on the Cotton Incorporated board, the Texas Pest Management Association, the Lions Club, and the St. Lawrence Cotton Growers. He’s a volunteer fireman and a Little League baseball and football coach. He has served on the St. Lawrence Catholic Church Parish Council and FSA County Committee.

He’s devoted to his family, wife Christy (a school nurse), sons Reed, 8, and Owen, 6, and daughter Lacy, 2.

He says he’s never thought about doing anything other than farming— the long-ago banker’s advice notwithstanding. “While I was in school at Angelo State, I missed the farm; I found out pretty quickly what I wanted to do.”

He studied ag business in college, but says farming “is in my blood.”

It must be: He is the fifth generation — on both his father’s and his mother’s (Ellen) side — to farm. His mother’s Runnels County family farm was recently awarded the State of Texas Heritage Award for having been in the family for 100 years. “It’s still owned and operated by my mother’s family,” he says.

Farming is a heritage of which Eric Seidenberger is proud. He's also proud that he's been able to carry on that tradition and that he's learned a lot about farming in 16 years on his own — such as conserving soil and water make environmental and economic sense; technology pays dividends; and family is what matters most.

Oh yes, and *bankers aren't always right*.

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