

California cotton stages a partial comeback

By Ron Miller

Improved market prices and the prospect of a less restricted water supply have encouraged California farmers to plant more cotton this spring.

A federal government report based on farmer interviews, released last week, projects about 265,000 acres being planted this year, up 39 percent from last year. But cotton farmers and cotton handlers say they think 300,000 acres or more will be planted, based on cottonseed sales.

A spokesman for the Bakersfield-based marketing cooperative Calcot Ltd., Mark Bagby, said cotton prices on the futures market have been strong this spring.

“Pima has been in the 80 to 85 cent range and acala has been 70 cents and higher,” he said. “That may entice more farmers with water to plant cotton.”

Fresno County farmer Don Cameron said cottonseed is hard to get right now. He’s planting about 400 acres of cotton, after planting none last year. Right now, he said, cold temperatures cause concern.

“We’ve planted a small amount and are hoping we don’t have to replant,” Cameron said.

Advisors say cotton responds better to temperatures in the mid-70s or warmer, and temperatures in that warmer range are in the long-range forecast for later this week.

In Kings County, farmer Gary Esajian is also returning to cotton production this year. He said low prices and lack of water caused him to skip cotton planting last year. Esajian said he has only missed planting cotton two years since 1980. The first was



while he was in school, and the second was last year due to the severe water shortage.

“It just wasn’t attractive to put any cotton in,” he said.

“I have permanent crops that need water,” he added. “I can’t take water away from my trees and vines to give to cotton; it just didn’t make sense. We’ve committed to irrigate trees. Cotton goes out when you’re married to permanent crops like trees and vines.”

Esajian is planting 500 acres of pima cotton, because his land is more conducive to growing that variety. He said he’ll cut back on other field crops to grow a little bit of cotton.

But, even with a wetter year, water remains an issue. Esajian said he’ll get six-tenths of an acre-foot of water per acre that he farms. He needs two acre-feet per acre to grow a crop. As a result, he will have to fallow 1,500 acres to make up the difference.

“I’ll strip the water from my fallowed land and use it on the crops I’m planting,” he explained.

And, to stretch the water even further, Esajian said he plans to use drip irrigation on his cotton for the first time. He’ll install a drip line in every other row. The cost of the supplies is a minor amount compared to the cost of water, he said.

“We don’t waste much around here,” he added.

Cameron said he planted crops earning higher values last year, including tomatoes and silage. Because of what is happening in the dairy sector, Cameron said, “this year, I’m taking the land I planted for silage last year and planting cotton.”

The president and CEO of the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations, Earl Williams, said there are glimmers of enthusiasm among cotton growers and ginners this year, noting that inquiries have been made about the possibility of reopening some California gins that were shuttered due to the low prices and limited acres in recent years.

“We expect our remaining gins to be up and running this year and perhaps a few more jobs in the cotton production sector,” Williams said.

He said the infrastructure to accommodate the cotton sector remains in place in California, and suggested that what will happen with this year’s increased

acres is that volume will go up, remaining gins will operate longer hours and they will be more profitable.

“With the downturn in California cotton acres during the past several years, ginners have been lucky that seed prices have been strong,” Williams said. “That has enabled a lot of cotton gins to stay in business, but we’ve remained concerned that the downturn in cotton plantings might cause a loss of infrastructure to process the cotton, since so many gins have had to close.”

Across the United States, farmers are expected to plant a total of 10.5 million acres of cotton, 15 percent more than last year, according to last week’s report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The largest acreage increase is in Texas, where producers intend to plant 600,000 more acres of upland cotton than in 2009.

American pima cotton growers intend to increase their plantings by 34 percent to 190,000 acres, compared to about 142,000 acres in 2009. California, with 162,000 acres going into the ground in 2010, accounts for the largest share of the nation’s pima acreage.

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