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Cotton-pickin' profits

Santa Rosa farmers reap big bucks from annual harvest

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Although the label on your T-shirt may read "Made in China," the cotton in that garment may have been grown in Santa Rosa County.

Santa Rosa farmers are in the midst of picking this year's cotton crop, the last product in the fall harvest.

Cotton is big business in the north end of the county, second only to peanuts.

n Statewide, 124,000 bales of cotton were produced in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Santa Rosa produced 36,600 bales, second only to Jackson County's 44,900 bales. Escambia County was third with 11,300 bales.

n Last year, 16,708 acres were planted. This year, it's about 24,000 acres, said Mike Donahoe, Santa Rosa's extension service director.

n Cotton bales plus cottonseed — used in margarine, cooking oil and soap, among other things — brought farmers about \$12 million.

"Santa Rosa County is one of the few counties in Florida that has historically been in cotton, since at least the early 1900s," Donahoe said. "Back in the early '70s, other counties had just about dwindled to nothing, but Santa Rosa County still had a small acreage of cotton. For many years, we had the only two gins in the state."

Now, there are gins in Escambia and Jackson counties in addition to the two in Jay, he said.

Cindy Anderson, executive director of the TEAM Santa Rosa Economic Development Council, said cotton helps maintain a diverse economic base.

"These sorts of crops make us unique," Anderson said. "Cotton and other agricultural products produced here, together with our beautiful beaches, technology corridor and other economic assets, add to the diverse economic culture of our area. There is strength in diversity."

'Up at 5' for cotton

Joe Smith, 55, is a fourth-generation farmer in Jay. His son, Travis, 26, farms with him.

This year, they're farming about 1,500 acres, with 1,000 of that in cotton.

Farming is a trying profession, Joe Smith said, with out-of-control factors like weather. But it's

something he's wanted to do since he was 5 years old.

"My father farmed, his father farmed, and my great-granddaddy farmed, all in Jay," Smith said. "I've always loved it. I like to watch things grow. I like to see what I can do to get the best yield and to try to be profitable at the same time."

The cotton growing process began in May for Smith, when he planted his fields. After planting, the crop requires period applications of herbicide, pesticide, fertilizer and other chemicals. Once picking begins, the cotton demands his attention early every morning. He works until dark.

"Usually, we'd be getting up around 6 o'clock, probably," Smith said. "Here lately, since the time changed, we've been getting up at 5."

Smith works with his son and one full-time employee, with occasional part-time help.

Smith's work barn is about a quarter mile from his home. His six-row John Deere cotton picker does most of the work. It will take about a month, with agreeable weather, to pick his 1,000 acres of cotton.

He leaves the cotton bundled in the field where it grew, and the gin picks up cotton four days to week after it was picked.

"The profitability of cotton is not as good as peanuts, but it's a good rotation crop with peanuts. We plant two years of cotton and then one year of peanuts," Smith said. "Both peanuts and cotton stand up to dry conditions."

Rotating between the two benefits both plants, Donahoe said.

Peanuts leave residual nitrogen in the soil that cotton uses the following year.

Cotton and peanuts also suffer from different diseases and pests, so changing the crop grown on any particular parcel of land keeps any one set of problems from getting a foothold, he said.

Profits may be down

The fluffy white fiber isn't the only marketable good a cotton plant produces.

"Last year, there was good profit in the cottonseed, but it's down this year," Smith said. "Usually, the seed is enough to pay for the ginning and maybe have a little left over, like it did last year. This year, I don't know if the seed will pay for the ginning."

This year, the cotton has been impacted by too much rain, he said. Some plants have rotted and the fiber has hardened because of excessive water.

"Some of the best that I've heard is around 600 pounds (per acre this year)," Donahoe said. "That's just over a bale. Normally, our best would be 2½ or three bales."

Most Santa Rosa cotton farmers take their yield to one of the gins in Jay, Donahoe said.

There, the seed is separated from the fiber. Seed is sent to a mill where it is processed for oil.

Marketing associations, of which most farmers are members, keep the cotton in warehouses until time to send it to market for manufacturing.

"In recent years, a lot of (American) textile mills have gone out of business," Donahoe said. "It's been more profitable to send it to China or wherever. It's processed there and sent back as a finished product."

Additional Facts

Cash crops

The top five agricultural money-makers in Santa Rosa County in 2008

1. Peanuts:

\$20 million.

2. Cotton/cottonseed:

\$12.04 million.

3. Ornamental horticulture (cut flowers): \$12 million.

4. Hay/silage:

\$5 million.

5. Truck crops (vegetables and fruit): \$2.75 million.

Source: The Santa Rosa

County Extension Service
