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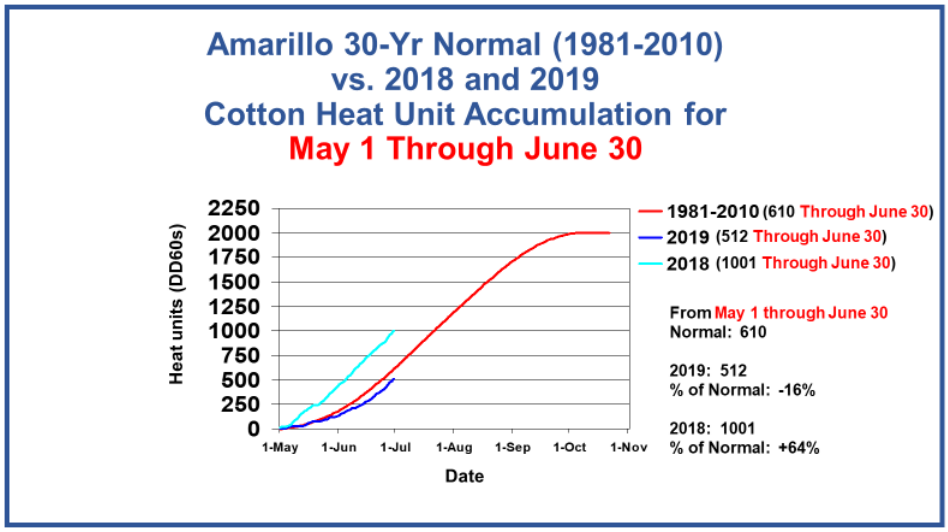
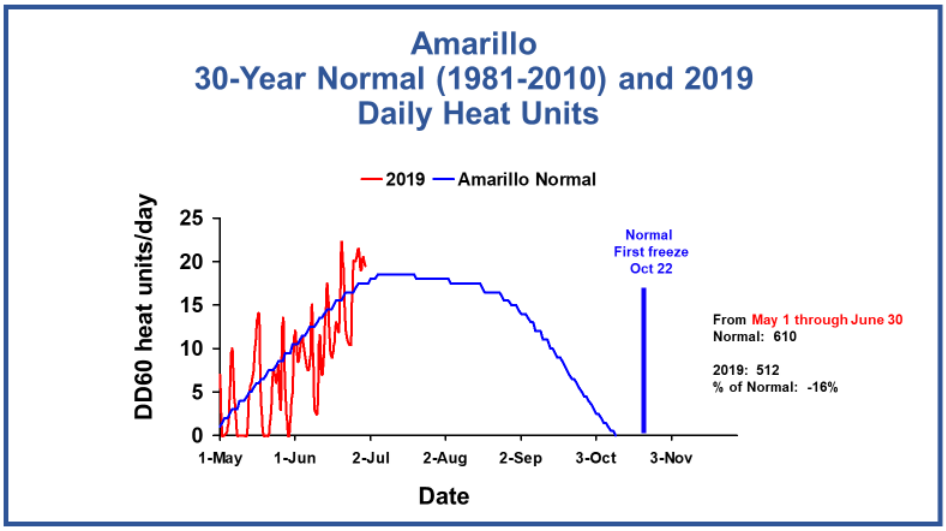
Growers "Picking Up the Pieces" After the Most Difficult Start Since at Least 2000

The last month has been extremely challenging to say the least. The 2019 crop year start was cold and wet, with numerous incessant thunderstorm events across the area. This resulted in loss (or severe damage), seedling disease issues, and crop setbacks on perhaps hundreds of thousands of acres in the region. Many cotton fields have gone under the "crop insurance knife" and are now planted to corn or sorghum. After acquiring and analyzing Amarillo weather data from NOAA going back to the year 2000, it is readily apparent that from May 1 through June 15, we experienced the most difficult start since 2000. Growing conditions turned around in mid-June and recovery for most surviving cotton acres was triggered. Some extremely marginal stands are still being considered for insurance adjustment. The graphs below indicate the issues with the cool conditions.





Management Concerns

- Normal to above normal temperatures are needed to keep the crop recovery moving forward.
- In many instances, growers are faced with thin or skippy stands and a late crop. Many surviving fields can be considered 2-3 weeks behind in terms of plant growth and canopy size. However, cotton plants "know their age" and although short statured due to "stacked nodes" are still progressing to the fruiting stage. I have found squares on nodes ranging from 5 through 10. Some varieties tend to initiate first fruiting branches earlier (lower mainstem nodes) than others.
- It takes about 21 days for a pinhead square to become an open bloom. Therefore, small squares on plants now should bloom in about 15-18 days. The math indicates that these blooms should appear around July 20 or so.

Herbicides

- Over-the-top applications of various dicamba formulations on XtendFlex varieties, 2,4-D choline products (Enlist Duo and Enlist One) on Enlist varieties, and Liberty (glufosinate) are going out. It is extremely important to recognize the need to apply these products on small weeds per the label directions.
- Getting residual products applied (e.g. metolachlor, Warrant, etc.) will be important to prevent further weed emergence.
- Watch tank mix partners and check labels and websites for approved tank mixes. For more on weed control thoughts and links to various hormone herbicide product websites see the May 17th newsletter.
- Be good stewards of all herbicide products – especially hormone herbicide types (e.g. dicamba and 2,4-D). The last thing an already late crop needs is a further setback due to hormone herbicide drift onto non-tolerant varieties.
- We are already getting some reports and have seen some hormone herbicide drift issues. Some affected plants have 3-4 nodes of first position fruit. The great unknown at this time is whether these squares will abort or will be retained as viable fruit. If these squares do abort, it sets back the date of first bloom and thus delays maturity. The plants are not likely to have time to compensate due to the already challenging start in most areas. In our short season environment this threatens profit potential even more.

Nitrogen Fertilizer Considerations

- Although it is unknown what kind of fall we will encounter this year, being realistic and adjusting nitrogen (N) fertilizer is an important consideration.
- Reducing any further N fertilizer applications (if planned) should be seriously considered. Unless we have an exceptional fall, the last thing a late crop needs is excessive N.
- Generally speaking, for each bale of yield goal, the crop will remove from the field (found almost exclusively in seed) about 40-45 lbs of actual N per acre. Due to inefficiencies in uptake and in the soil, about 50 lbs N/acre from all sources (including applied fertilizer N, soil profile residual NO_3-N, any possible NO_3-N in irrigation water) are generally recommended.
- It is important to not over-fertilize with N if reduced yield potential is anticipated. This is due to the fact that it makes late cotton more difficult to manage on the back side of the season.
- Late season aphid problems can be aggravated by high N status plants.
- Any further delay in crop maturity due to excessive N is nearly guaranteed to exacerbate low micronaire challenges.

Plant Growth Regulators

- Mepiquat based plant growth regulator (PGR) products will not help plants compensate for earlier weather and disease damage or for late planting. These products include such brand names as Pix Ultra, Mepex, Stance, Pentia, etc.
- Under good growing conditions, these PGRs may increase fruit retention, control plant growth and promote earliness.
- These products should not be applied if crop is under any stresses including moisture; weather; severe mite, insect, or nematode damage; disease stress; herbicide injury; or fertility stress. DO NOT use on cotton that is stressed or likely to be stressed.
- These PGRs can impact crop earliness through better early season fruit retention. A good boll load will normally help control plant growth.
- Fields with poor early-season fruit retention, excellent soil moisture, and high N fertility status may be candidates for poor vegetative/fruiting balance and should be watched carefully. High growth potential varieties are more problematic in general, and specifically when the above conditions are encountered.
- Growth potential varies considerably among cotton varieties. Familiarize yourself with the varieties you have planted and consult seed company sales literature and agronomists to identify those with high growth potential.

Insects

- Protecting early fruit from insect damage is critical for 2019. Remain vigilant for cotton fleahoppers, lygus and other square robbing insects.

Photos courtesy of Shane Osborne, formerly OSU SWREC, Altus, OK