Louisiana’s cotton crop harvest figures may break records

Harvest figures on the Louisiana cotton crop look better than good—they may be records.

This good news is surprising because cotton growers were worried last spring as they saw persistent and unusually heavy rains and overflowing streams delay planting dates into June when the preferred time is May.

But now the Agricultural Statistics Service forecasts a harvest of 1.25 million bales of cotton in Louisiana this year, a 6 percent increase from the 1990 record harvest of nearly 1.18 million bales. Yield per acre is forecast to average 779 pounds, which would be the third-highest per acre yield on record for Louisiana. A five-year average for Louisiana is about 700 pounds.

Thomas Burch, cotton specialist with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, said final harvest figures could put the per acre yield even higher than forecast.

Burch said 90 to 95 percent of Louisiana cotton had been picked as of last week.

Good growing and harvesting weather, a piece of machinery called a module builder and shorter season cotton varieties probably account for the turnaround in this year’s cotton outlook, he said. “We had for the most part adequate rainfall after the crop emerged and good distribution of that rainfall,” Burch said.

A module builder compresses several bales of cotton into a large block, which can be left at the edge of the field until the gin is ready for it. A gin separates the fiber, or lint, from the seed.

Yield was good despite a late planting. “One reason is that we’re planting earlier maturing varieties,” he said.

Older varieties of cotton take 160 to 170 days to mature, compared to today’s varieties that take 130 to 140 days, Burch said.

“For the state as a whole, we have a fairly light insect year,” Burch said. “We have extensive use of the cotton module builder now.”

Burch said the cotton module builder allows producers “to keep harvesting once they get started. They do not have to wait for empty trailers to be available from the cotton gin. So, today we have many thousands of bales of cotton stored in modules all over the state. That cotton will be harvested within the next months as gins can get to it.”

“We have produced overall a very good crop both in terms of yield per acre and in terms of quality of this crop,” Burch said.

The fiber is stronger than average and perhaps a little longer—both marks of quality—and grades are acceptable, he said.

New variety of cotton holds great promise

A new variety of cotton that promises savings on pesticides and a stronger fiber has been released to plant breeders and commercial seed producers. A commercial line of the cotton may be available to farmers as early as next year.

From the Hawaiian cotton, U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists got a neeless trait that shows promise of being resistant to three major cotton pests—a bollworm-budworm, a plant bug and pink bollworm.

“Insect pests aren’t attracted to a wild Hawaiian cotton species because it doesn’t produce nectar and many insects feed on cotton nectar at some stage of their life cycle,” said William R. Meredith, a plant geneticist with the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service, in a news release.

“The fiber is stronger than average and perhaps a little longer—both marks of quality—and grades are acceptable, he said.

In addition, the strain has a smooth leaf, which means less trash in the cotton and higher grades, the news release said.

A favorable government program and favorable prices, compared with grain and soybean prices, have led to the planting of cotton in areas of the state south of Alexandria where cotton had almost disappeared as a major crop in recent decades. Burch said there is already talk about planting more acreage in cotton next year.