A harvester rolls through high cotton on H&H Farms in northeast Louisiana, where yields ran to an average of two bales to the acre this year.

Picking time in Louisiana's cotton country

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

EXTENSION - Johnny Ballance and nine other farmers own the Boeuf Prairie Gin here, but Ballance runs it. He's the partner with the know-how.

Ginning cotton is the next link after picking it in the chain of getting it from the field to the shirt on your back. Ginning separates the white fluffy lint from the seed. The seeds, stripped of their cottony down, are small and black, about the size of soybean. They are worth about a nickel a pound and are cooked and ground and further processed into products like margarine, cooking oil and cow feed. But seeds are just a by-product in growing cotton. The money is in the lint.

The standard weight of a bale of cotton is 480 pounds, although the weight of a bale coming out of the gin can vary. Cotton was trading for 68 to 70 cents a pound on the New York market recently.

In northeast Louisiana and along the Red River, where the land is flat and the soil deep and rich, 620,000 acres of cotton were grown this year. It has not been an especially good year. But compared to the outlook at planting time — when farmers had to replant because of too much rain — the yield isn't bad, Ballance said.

Lower-than-hoped-for yields have occurred throughout the American cotton belt, which runs from California to North Carolina. This is cotton-picking time in the cotton belt, although it is winding down near Extension, which is a few miles south of Fort Necessity in Franklin Parish.

In some parts of the cotton-growing region picking continues into December, right up to Christmas.

Ballance said work at Boeuf Prairie Gin is slacking off but at full throttle, the gin never closed. The work day was divided into two 12-hour shifts. Going non-stop, Boeuf Prairie Gin turned out 400 bales of cotton a day. The gin

Cotton sample is pulled to check the staple, or length of the fiber. A long staple indicates better grade.
Bales of ginned cotton line Franklin Cotton Warehouse in Winnsboro. The warehouse holds cotton until it is sold and shipped.

Cotton

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receives most of its cotton from fields within a 20-mile radius. The gin charges the grower a fee based on the weight of the lint and the seed — no charge for the trash content.

"We are practically through. Everything has been picked one time and they are going back scrapping," Ballance said. "We have real good weather, not more than a half inch of rain at one time."

Ballance knows of no hand-picking of cotton anymore. Gathering the fluffy locks is done by machine nearly everywhere in the American cotton belt.

This may be an off-year due to the weather, but cotton is always worthy growing in Louisiana, said Tom Burch, a cotton specialist in the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

"It is about our second-biggest crop, usually, in terms of gross value, behind soybeans," Burch said.

The Louisiana crop is worth between $300 million to $350 million a year. That includes value-added handling, such as hauling, storing, warehousing and some milling, Burch said. The 1988 crop fell within that range, valued at about $347 million.

"Grades for this year's crop are good, meaning producers should get a little more money per pound of lint," Burch said. "But we had a lot of weather problems early this year, excessive rain and cold weather at the time we needed to be planting the crop," Burch said. "This resulted in significant acreage being planted later than recommended. That has tended to reduce yields."

Cotton is sold by its grade, and grade is established at USDA classing offices.

In Louisiana, the average amount of lint per acre is 680 pounds. This year's average appears to be running behind that, at about 658 pounds, Burch said. Some farmers produced more than 1,500 pounds an acre, "but not many," he said.

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Bennie Robinson, assistant in charge of the office, said in heavy ginning time the staff may get eight or nine days behind. The grade on a bale of cotton is important to the grower. It is a factor in the bale's price.

The quality of cotton is determined by several factors. One is its color — "the brighter the cotton, the better," said Robinson. Fiber length, or staple, is important. Longer staple cotton brings a better price, Robinson said.

Fine fiber is better than coarse in pricing and indicates the maturity of the cotton, he said. Much of the grading is still done by hand, Robinson said, though machine grading is taking over more of the measuring and assessing.

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Load of cotton is dumped from the cotton picker into a trailer, which will haul it to a gin.

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KEEPING the name cotton and its qualities before the public boosts the demand, she said. Apparently consumers like cotton, she said, since some non-cotton products are advertised as "cottony soft" or "feels like cotton."

"Cotton producers are in the fashion business whether they realize that or not," said Lynch. "If consumers don't want cotton products there is no demand. They demand what they know about."

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Cotton is faring well in the fiber trade — largely because of advertising, which is funded by a research and promotion fee growers pay, according to Marjory Lynch, communications director for the Cotton Board.

Cotton competes with the man-made materials — polyester, rayon, acrylic, for example. But in the first six months of 1989, cotton was used in 51 percent of the retail apparel and home furnishings, Lynch said.

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