

Shurely on Cotton: What Cotton's Situation Means for Southwest Georgia

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Maybe you haven't thought much about it but look around. You'll see less cotton planted this year than in the past. Places where you typically have seen cotton, you'll likely now see more peanuts or corn.

Cotton, peanuts, and corn are Georgia's largest row crops in acreage and value. This is especially true in Southwest Georgia, where agriculture sits on top of one of the U.S. and world's largest underground aquifers. All three crops are produced largely irrigated. Cotton farmers are also peanut and corn

farmers. Georgia is the largest U.S. producer of peanuts and the second largest producer of cotton.

Farmers have suffered from escalating costs for 3-4 years. Further, the prices received for crops has not kept pace, resulting in thin and risky profit margins. For cotton, for example, the expected price for the soon-to-be-harvested 2025 crop is the lowest in six years and second lowest in over 10 years. This is well below the full cost of production — not only for Georgia producers but for most of U.S. production.

Thus, acreage is down significantly this year. Georgia cotton acreage is down 24% this year — the lowest acreage since 1993. U.S. acres are down 17% from last year.

Why is the price of cotton so low? First of all, World demand/Use has yet to fully recover from where it was prior to the major consumer downturn caused by the COVID pandemic. Second, cotton has lost considerable market share to man-made fibers. Third, the U.S. has lost a portion of its market share of exports to foreign textile mills to increased production and competition by Brazil. Typically, about 80% of U.S. production is exported.

So, the best way to describe it — the world pie has shrunk and the U.S. share of that now smaller pie has also shrunk. Demand has been slow and uncertain and exports inconsistent. Markets don't like uncertainty and inconsistency.

Back and forth uncertainty and unknowns in Trump tariff policies also has not helped. Chinese mills, typically fairly good and dependable buyers of US cotton, have been almost non-existent.

Southwest Georgia is very fortunate to have irrigation and other crops like corn and peanuts that farmers can count on to offset the reduction in cotton acres. But this is not a sustainable solution. Beneficial crop rotations are disrupted, and peanuts and corn infrastructure is being stretched beyond its limits. Cotton ginning and other supporting infrastructure

will go partially unused and well below full capacity. The owners/stockholders of gins, many of them also cotton farmers, will suffer financially. Some Georgia gins may choose not to operate this year.

We need cotton to come back. There is no replacement for cotton in the landscape of Georgia agriculture.

Again, look around. Notice what people are wearing, especially younger consumers. Chances are it's not cotton or certainly not as much cotton as it used to be. We've lost a large share of the clothing market to man-made fibers. This is especially true for women and for both the men's and women's sports/activewear apparel market.

Look at what you are wearing. Look at the tags. What is it made of? Where is it made? Man-made fibers are not environmentally friendly and contribute to pollution by petroleum and microplastics.

Cotton is plant-based and more environmentally friendly. Buy cotton. It matters. It helps. You're helping farmers, your neighbors, and your local economy.