

# Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

## Cotton- Risk Management

### Newsletter



Part 1 of 1

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By the grace of God and the patience of an understanding banker, Jeff Roper has farmed near Plains, Texas, since 1993.

“Through good crops and bad, I’m still here,” says Roper, who grows organic peanuts and conventional dryland cotton, along with a few other crops as needed to maintain a fairly strict rotation for the peanut acreage.

“A banker stuck with me early on,” he says, “or I wouldn’t have made it. He taught me to build up equity.”

Roper says he’s trying to find a balance on his farm – a position between too much risk and too little opportunity. “Where is the balance?” he asks. I’ve farmed for 23 years, but haven’t found it yet.”

It doesn’t exist in the current farm program, which has weakened the traditional safety net that kept many farmers in business during hard times. “Some years, the only money we made was from subsidies,” he says. “And we paid taxes on it.”

Most consumers don’t realize that sound farm policy is a national security issue, he says. “And our ag policy from Washington is made mostly by legislators from non-rural districts.”

But, says Roper, farmers are, by nature, hopeful. He keeps that in mind as he decides how best to manage his Yoakum County farm. He considers himself a peanut farmer and is transitioning to organic to take advantage of premium prices.

#### SEEKS DIVERSIFICATION

He’s grown peanuts since 1996, and he grew his first organic peanut crop in 2014. “I’ve grown cotton since I started farming,” he says. “I like to grow it. I like to diversify.” He’s grown some organic cotton under irrigation, but its moving toward all dryland cotton.

In recent years, Roper says, his best cotton yields brought the “lowest prices ever. But in 2007, I made my highest yield and got the best price ever. “That’s a too rare occurrence, he says.

Peanuts have struggled as well. “In 2011 and 2012, Texas peanut acreage was cut almost in half. The last two years, a lot of acreage has come back. The last farm bill is a little more favorable to peanuts.”

He’s concerned about the current world supply of peanuts and the attacks by foreign competitors over farm bill supports. “I’ve heard that Nicaragua may test the U.S. peanut program, taking a page out of the Brazil playbook (referring to the WTO ruling against the U.S. cotton program). That’s hard to deal with, in addition to low prices. We have a supply and demand issue with peanuts- the largest supply of U. S. peanuts ever.”

Export markets offer some hope, especially China. "I just got back from China," he says. "We are pushing peanuts to them because the Chinese know the U.S. produces peanuts of dependable quality."

Growing organic peanuts isn't easy, Roper admits. "Land has to be out of traditional production for three years, with no conventional fertilizer used during the transition period."

## **ORGANIC COTTON?**

He split pivot irrigation circles as he transitioned into organic peanuts, half in traditional crops and half in transitioning organic peanuts. "We have to have that three-year buffer," he says. "Now, I'm one year away from having 100 percent of irrigated land in organic production."

"I'm debating whether to grow organic cotton or not." He says a certified organic gin is nearby and prices for organic cotton could range from \$1 to \$1.10 per pound. But growing organic cotton comes with some heavy production challenges, including weed and pest control.

He will rotate wheat onto organic peanut acreage and leave the land fallow in the summer. "A lot of land will be grazed."

Weed control is his biggest challenge. He has used an approved weed control product that's "mostly salt," but relies on cultivation and hoe hands. "It's hard to find enough help to get rid of all the weeds." He says if he can get the peanuts to canopy, weeds are not much trouble.

Planting date makes a difference, too, Roper says. "I proved to myself last year that I can plant too early. The soil wasn't warm enough; it was wet, and I had to replant twice. Fields that I planted late, June 26, were the best peanuts I made, and also the cleanest." He treats insects as needed with a product made from garlic.

Market type also plays a role. He grows Valencia and Spanish peanuts, both earlier maturing than runner or Virginia types. "With short-season peanuts, I can plant in mid-June, after most of the weeds have sprouted and been plowed out. I can plant, clean and reduce the amount of hoeing needed. Before planting, I keep fields as clean as possible."

He says late planting and short-season varieties also use irrigation water more efficiently.

## **PRODUCTION AUDITS**

Additional challenges with organic production include potential production audits every year. "And we have to clean equipment thoroughly when we come out of a field to prevent spreading weed problems,"

His cotton variety is transgenic, with the Bt gene, as are nearby corn fields. "With all the Bt cotton and corn, where are all the bugs going?" he asks.

"My dryland cotton will be conventional," Roper says. "I won't plant irrigated cotton this year, and haven't for a few years."

He's planted the same variety, DynaGro 2570, for the last four or five years. "Three years ago, that variety made 450 pounds per acre. In 2014 it made 300 pounds, and it made 1.33 bales per acre in 2015."

In the current economic environment, good yields may not be enough to sustain a farm, he says. He's concerned especially for younger farmers and those who want to get into farming but have no family to give them a boost with a few acres or shared equipment. "It's just impossible," he says.

Established farmers, too, face challenges. "We have to be efficient," Roper says, "and we have to be careful of purchases."

Farming offers some latitude for farm families, he says. "At certain times of the year we can take off and do other things, but other times we are super busy."

Farmers now also have to be aware of the power of social media and how misinformation becomes accepted as truth, Roper says. "We deal with erroneous perceptions now more than ever before. But farmers are tough. We still have to have hope. Faith, family, and farming – that's who we are."

*Reference:*

*Southwest Farm Press website*

<http://southwestfarmpress.com/peanuts/jeff-roper-efficiency-faith-and-good-banker-help-him-survive>

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