
Summary Priorities to Enhance Economic Opportunities for Agricultural Producers
National Cotton Council
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Cotton producers continue to face economic challenges. One of the most dramatic changes is the shift in markets. A few years ago U.S. produced cotton fiber was processed by domestic textile mills, converted into apparel and home furnishings by American workers and sold to U.S. consumers. Today U.S. textile mills consume less than 30% of the crop production, putting additional pressures on price and quality to meet global demands. Shifting markets combined with volatile prices and skyrocketing input costs make it imperative that new technologies be found to keep U.S. agriculture healthy. Research and extension can play a critical role to enhance economic opportunities.

There is a growing perception that the ability of public sector to meet producer needs is decreasing. Shrinking public sector support creates a void in which private industry including crop consultants and commodity groups must fill. Also, the educational level of farmers is at an all time high and increasingly they are demanding rapid access to high quality information to assist in crop management.

From the biology and agronomic standpoint, the cotton industry is suffering from a void in knowledge on pest management in a reduced-chemical production environment. With a successful boll weevil eradication program and introduction of transgenic pest resistant (Bt) cotton, chemical use has been reduced dramatically. Consequently, thrips, aphids, plant bugs, and stinkbugs are now important pests. Likewise, weed pest management has changing with the rapid adoption of herbicide resistant crops. Better information on how to control weeds to improve and conserve soil, and prevent or manage weed resistance is needed in a practical and cost effective way. Precision agricultural technologies and genetic improvements are thought to be key to the next breakthroughs in efficiency.

Nematodes, especially reniform nematode, represent a serious and growing problem for cotton. Reluctantly, the reniform nematode is used as an example of a growing frustration in our organization on the public sector's inability to respond to critical and changing needs. In 2004 and 2005, a multi-state task force of cotton nematologists put together a comprehensive plan for dealing with the growing nematode economic problem. The plan had short-term educational aspects as well as long-term research components. After vetting the plan with several state and federal public research institutions, the call has yet gone unheeded. This is a symptom that I challenge us to work together to seek increased efficiencies of conducting research and extension. If new funds are not forthcoming, this may call for increased collaboration across states, interregional programs, commodity and foundation support and private industry. These comments are not intended to be negative toward any one agency but to demonstrate the costs due to the lack of a mechanism for addressing quickly and precisely emerging economic problems.