

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Producers talk about hope after drought-breaking rains of 2015

ALTUS – Southwest Oklahoma cotton producer Matt Muller stepped into a beyond-the banks pond while working on an irrigation pump.

Muller turned toward his wife and said, “Kellie, I’ve got to get some new rubber boots today, these are taking on water.”

The comment was significant because for about five years almost nothing took on water here as well as in many areas of Oklahoma. But then came the spring of 2015.

Gary McManus, state climatologist with the Oklahoma Climatological Survey, said the estimated starting date of the drought is Oct. 1, 2010. Altus is located in Jackson County which was out of the drought by May 26, 2015, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Between the onset of the drought and the day before Altus began getting good rains on April 11 of this year, the Oklahoma Mesonet weather network station at Altus recorded 75.9 inches of rain, which is 48.4 inches below normal for that time span, McManus said.

“The first big break came when Altus received about 5 inches of rain from April 8-27,” he said. “That set the stage for further relief when from May 5-25 they received 10.68 inches of rain. So between the two periods, April 8-May 25, Altus received 15.67 inches of rain, approximately 10.7 inches above normal.

“That was also more rain than Altus had recorded from June 24, 2014 to April 7, 2015.”

Muller recently shared with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry what the rains have meant to his operation.

The pond this lanky producer was standing in is on land he leases and it had received water for irrigation from the Lugert-Altus Irrigation District until a few years ago. However, during the drought, the pond became a sand pit. At what should have been a depth of about 10 feet of water there were ant dens.

Now, the irrigation water has returned, ants have been replaced by frogs and Muller’s cowboy boots have been replaced by his leaky rubber boots.

“I put them on and they looked great, but I guess they’ve dry-rotted sitting in the basement for five years, collecting cob webs,” Muller said of the rubber boots. “Now they’ve got holes in them and so my feet are soaked. They’re not doing much good.”

That’s just a fact, not a complaint. Water is once again coming from the lake. Muller has water in his ponds and water in his furrow-irrigated cotton fields.

He went too long without to complain.

Muller missed out on a wheat crop in 2011, 2013, 2014 and “I even missed this one.”

“Some of my neighbors were able to make a crop,” he said. “It was very dependent on when you planted and whether you were planting behind a crop from last year, but even this year I made a below average crop.”

Muller said that on the land he farms, dryland cotton was non-existent or below average in 2011, 2012 and 2013, but he had an average dryland crop in 2014.

He didn’t have irrigated cotton as the drought kept a merciless grip year after year.

“We didn’t have irrigation water from 2011 to 2014. There was no lake water to irrigate with,” he said. “So those acres, sometimes it would get harvested, but instead of making three bales to the acre like we’re used to it would only make from zero to maybe one bale to the acre because with no irrigation, the irrigated cotton became dryland cotton.”

Muller also lost three crops of grain sorghum and a canola crop.

“It has become very frustrating to plant things, get it up and going and watch it die, over and over and over,” he said.

During the drought he also let go of a full-time employee and stopped hiring part-time employees. He did retain two employees and the Muller family remains busy as well.

“Financially I can’t really explain how well we got through it because my wife and I decided back in about 2008 we wanted to pay down our debts,” Muller said. “So we had made headway in 2008, 2009 and 2010, really paying down on a lot of our equipment and our land mortgage and stuff like that. We paid off our house. So when the drought hit, we were in good financial shape. We had some reserve money.

“We spent through that and we’ve had a very good banker that stuck with us. I haven’t updated a lot of equipment. I have four tractors with over 10,000 hours. So, a lot of my equipment is getting old, a lot of it is getting a lot of hours on it, but it still works. I fix it up and we keep going.”

Those are some of the losses to the drought, Muller said.

However, he added there have been gains as well.

“I always knew the value of water. I knew and appreciated that, but now even more,” Muller said. “Because up until this event, the irrigation from the lake had never failed to deliver water, it at least delivered some even back in the dry spells before.

“So we’ve learned to be more frugal, now that we do have water. We’re going to be more conservative with it.”

One example can be found at Muller’s barn.

“We spray to kill the weeds so we use a fair amount of fresh water to spray with. I was growing concerned that water restrictions might get to the point where we would run short on water to mix with herbicides to spray with,” he said. “So I talked with the local NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and they helped me engineer and design something. I guttered my barns and put up big water holding tanks. So, I have 20,000 gallons capacity to catch rain water and I’ve already filled them up twice and drained them this year. I’ve went through 50,000 gallons of rainwater.

“That’s 50,000 gallons of rainwater that didn’t come from the rural water district. I’m going to try to expand that system in the future so I can carry through these dry spells by conserving water.”

It is probably safe to say this drought was the worst Oklahoma had experienced since the 1950s drought, according to McManus of the Oklahoma Climatological Survey. This year’s weather may also share something else with the 1950s.

“We are definitely on pace with 1957 to possibly capture the prize as the wettest year on record,” he said. “Through July 30, the statewide average according to the Mesonet was 34.90 inches, 13.10 inches above normal.

“The year of 1957 ended up with a statewide average of 34.17 inches through July, and then ended up with a rather ordinary 13.71 inches through the rest of the year. So 2015 has now overtaken 1957’s record-setting pace.”

Throughout the drought, crops died, but Muller said his faith lived on.

“I was reminded profoundly what I already knew and that was that God is faithful and while I would worry and fret there was nothing I could do other than pray for rain and ask and in His time it showed up in copious amounts,” he said.

Harvey Schroeder farms dryland cotton in the Frederick area in southwest Oklahoma. He also serves as executive director of the Oklahoma Cotton Council.

“With our producers, since the drought has broken and our lakes are full and our water tables are up, we’re seeing the optimistic side of this thing,” Schroeder said. “People’s attitudes are better. Cotton people still haven’t received an income period since the rain so we’re looking forward to having a harvest and using our infrastructure, because our infrastructure has suffered from a lack of use during this drought period.

“It lifts everybody’s spirits, the opportunity or the possibility of a crop because in that extreme drought, we knew we weren’t going to make anything, it just wasn’t going to happen.”

Schroeder is also quick to point out that like rains that produce runoff water these rains will most likely benefit others.

“This will help more than just farmers, this helps our municipalities, all of our infrastructure, our support businesses that we rely on and just the economy in general,” he said. “If we can make a cotton crop and have an income period, people are going to spend some money and it’s going to be better for everybody.”

True, there are challenges according to both Muller and Schroeder.

Muller points out that during the drought they missed out on some years of good commodity prices. Some equipment not used for about five years is breaking down. And the rains actually put them behind on the cotton crop.

Schroeder echoes some of the same points.

“This crop went in late. We’re across the board probably at least two weeks late, some as much as four weeks late being planted,” Schroeder said. “If you don’t deal with it on a daily basis, you look at rain and you say, ‘Well it rained, everything will be good.’ In cropping systems the timing of the rain is critical. This rain was a blessing that we got some soil moisture. We’re able to plant but it was late.

“Cotton needs heat units and it needs water and a kind September is one that extends our growing period and gives us an opportunity to fill the bolls. If we get a little rain in there it really helps out on the dryland cotton.”

So there are still question marks. But Schroeder said at least that means there’s a question as opposed to recent years when drought translated to almost certain losses.

“It’s nice to have these challenges,” Schroeder said, “because we haven’t got to deal with them in a while, so this is good.”

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Photo captions:

- 1) Southwest Oklahoma cotton producer Matt Muller recently talked with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry about having water following the rains

this year. Muller said, “I always knew the value of water, I knew and appreciated that, but now even more.”

- 2) Southwest Oklahoma cotton producer Matt Muller welcomes water back to his irrigated cotton crops.

