## 2014 ON-FARM EVALUATION OF COTTON VARIETY PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

Variety selection has become an increasingly more important challenge facing cotton producers across the U.S. Modern cotton varieties are currently released onto the marketplace very rapidly, due to increase competition among the major seed companies, advancements in herbicide tolerant traits for management of Palmer amaranth and multigene insect technologies, and accelerated advancements in breeding for higher yield potential, nematode tolerance, and fiber quality improvements. Modern cotton varieties vastly differ with regard to maturity, response to water deficit stress, and management requirements. Due to the rapid release of cotton varieties onto the marketplace, there is little time to effectively evaluate performance of new varieties, nor to determine how to position new varieties into environments where they are likely to perform competitively. Further complicating the matter is the rising seed and associated technology costs of modern varieties, shifting a larger proportion of the investment in growing cotton to the beginning of the season, unlike other agronomic input decisions which can be adjusted for yield expectations throughout the season. Variety selection is also a very expensive decision that has a significant impact on profitability, but is essentially a no-cost decision for growers that intend to grow cotton, unlike other inputs that may or may not be required. Additionally, improper variety selection could cost growers more than what they would spend on any other management practice. Variety decisions set the maximum yield potential for a particular field for that season, therefore there is a great need for timely and robust variety performance information across the belt in order to maximize yields and reduce losses associated with improper variety selection.

Many members of the Extension Cotton Specialists Working Group and others, with the support of Cotton Incorporated, established a large number of replicated on-farm cotton variety trials within most states in every region of the cotton belt (Southeast, Midsouth, Southwest US). Several varieties (representing most, if not all, brands and technologies) were selected based on grower interest, needs within each state, industry interest, and the preference of each state's cotton specialist or regional agronomist. These varieties were planted in replicated (two to four replicates depending on field variability) on-farm trials in producers' fields in representative soils and geographies within each region. Each trial was managed by the cooperating grower with the input of the Extension Cotton Specialist, Regional Agronomist, crop consultant, and/or the County Extension Agent. Results from individual states were made available through several outlets, but all trials that were supported by Cotton Inc. were included in the SeedMatrix<sup>™</sup> database, which allows for customized evaluation of varieties across selected environments. Contrary to Official Variety Trials, this on-farm testing program focused primarily on the most competitive varieties, captured many more environments, and evaluated performance under management of the grower with regard to technology, whereas OVT can generally evaluate many more varieties (including more experimental varieties) based on yield potential alone (without regard to technology) and in fewer environments.

During the 2014 production season, this program continued to effectively capture and evaluate variety performance across a broad range of yield environments, soil types, geographies, planting dates, harvest dates, grower management (growth regulators, weed management, insect management, fertility), degree of irrigation, rainfall patterns, water and heat stress, etc., allowing for robust assessment of variety stability to be generated. Some varieties were observed to consistently perform at or near the top, indicating a high degree of stability as they performed well across many of the aforementioned factors. Other varieties may only perform well in specific environments, suggesting that some varieties may need to be positioned only in particular types of environments such as heavily stressed environments, productive higher yielding dryland environments, moderately irrigated environments, or based on their most yield-limiting factor (response to irrigation or water deficit, nematode tolerance, etc) in order to be competitive.

The authors extend a special thanks to the Cotton Incorporated for supporting many of these trials, through the Cotton Inc. – Cotton Specialists Partnership: Large-Plot Onfarm Variety Testing Program.