

Producers and Sellers' Perspective

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Historical Background

Cotton Production in the Sudan

Cotton production in the Sudan has its roots as early as 1839 when it was introduced by Mumtaz Basha, a Turkish governor of Tokar district during the Turkish colonial rule in Sudan. In 1904 an American investor (Leigh Hunt) was granted a concession at Zeidab area -subsequently the Sudan plantation syndicate, a private company, was authorized to begin experiment with cotton production in 1911 in Tayba which was to become a nucleus for the prospective Gezira scheme. The construction of Sennar Dam in 1925 signaled the real take off for commercial cotton production in Sudan and in that year 80,000 feddans (virtually acres) were irrigated and expansion of area since then progressed in steady rates in Gezira and alongside Blue Nile and White Nile Banks.

Quality of Sudan Cotton over time

It is worth mentioning here that the early experience of cotton production in Sudan, coupled with technology – know-how borrowed from international pioneer companies helped to establish sound agricultural practices and a well educated and dedicated cotton farmers. It was not surprising that Sudan cotton was one of the best qualities in the world and the export from ELS cotton reached a peak of about 1.3 million bales in 1971 amounting to about 40% of the international trade on that type of cotton at that time (up to that time Sudan and Egypt used to export about 90% of the international exports of ELS cotton).

The emergence of stickiness problems in Sudan cotton

The problem of stickiness in Sudan was felt since the late seventies. This is the same date for the international outbreak of the problem. The phenomenon, stickiness, which was of little importance in the beginning of the 80s seems to have become wide spread both in Sudan and the world. It is not my intention in this short comment to explain the reasons for the outbreak of stickiness in the Sudan as the reasons are similar to those in other countries facing the problem.

Stickiness problem in the Sudan

Farmers perspective

For Sudanese cotton farmer stickiness problem means the following:

- More efforts in the field (picking) ...;
- Higher cost of production (as more spraying has to be done for Aphids and white fly);
- Lower yield;
- Lower prices and ultimately lower income: Hence their attitude towards the problem must be a mixture of dismay, feeling of injustice and bitterness.

For the marketing organization

Stickiness is number one problem in marketing Sudan cotton. Although currently we don't have carry over from previous years, sales volume and value could have been much higher with wider geographic distribution has it not been for stickiness problem. For marketing organization a lot of effort and resources are put to push sales and to convince non traditional buyers that our cotton possesses intrinsic value which outweighs the stickiness stigma. Stickiness also means lower prices, tougher competition and higher preparation costs. A study in the Sudan in the early 80s proved that roller ginning for sticky cotton is more expensive than non sticky cotton (low productivity due to frequent stop pages).

Applying for international help in dealing with stickiness cotton:

The efforts of Sudanese scientists to mitigate or eradicate the stickiness phenomenon are dealt with in a separate paper prepared by Prof. H. Khalifa. However the contribution of the national scientists had to be supported and complemented with international expertise. The studies done could pinpoint many factors as contributing to the stickiness. Some of them are as follows:

- the number of insecticide treatments applied and date of the last treatment;
- difficulty in reaching the insects as they are positioned on the lower side of the leaves;
- occasionally the early onset of the dry season in rain fed conditions, which is reputed to favor Aphids;
- effect of the plant population in the irrigated conditions;
- plant vegetation being more or less dense at the end of the season depending on the variety used;
- effect of sowing date;
- late harvesting leaving the cotton exposed to contamination for a longer time.

The non-exhaustive list of factors given above illustrates the complexity of the problem and the need for a global approach to solve it. The stickiness problem cannot be eliminated as long as the Aphids and white fly remain a problem. The problem can, however be controlled through various approaches in the field. Once sticky cotton is there, one of the more encouraging approaches would be to learn how to live with the problem: has to isolate the sticky cotton from the non-sticky one and hereby saving unnecessary and, indiscriminate economic losses. Early identification of the problem will not only save the growers from discounts but will also alert spinners to be ready to spin such cotton through adjustments in their machinery or through mixing. Such type of thinking encouraged us in the marketing organization to try and share the experience of the international cotton community in living with the problem.

The objectives of the SCCL sought in the project

When SCCL contacted the ICAC and CFC in 1995 to sponsor and finance the project we had the following motivation:

To improve our sales of Sudanese cotton by establishing an internationally agreed upon method for grading sticky cotton.

It is our belief that pricing of our cotton is influenced by stickiness stigma rather than a real physical existence. Indiscriminate discounting lowers the income to cotton farmers. Previous studies of stickiness in Sudan cotton proved that contamination with stickiness is partial and of various levels, some growths are found to be even almost stickiness free but still discounted based on the well established reputation for stickiness. Therefore our objective in joining this project was to find an internationally accepted methodology for grading cotton for stickiness. We also meant to increase our sales by establishing an international threshold for dealing with various levels of stickiness in spinning.

Before concluding this comment I would like to state that the decision to join the project was not an easy one for us: simply, to do that we had to admit the existence of this sort of contamination in our cotton: very simple to say but very difficult to do. Eventually we had the courage to admit it and the reward is very obvious. We possess now the appropriate technology to measure and grade stickiness, we have the competent personnel and scientists who are thoroughly trained to do it and above all we have regained confidence in our cotton.

Thanks for listening.