

## COTTON DEFOLIATION IN GEORGIA

### UGA Cotton Agronomists: Jared Whitaker & Guy Collins

Cotton harvest-aids are used primarily to facilitate machine harvest. Timely defoliation and harvest of cotton also reduces weathering-induced yield and fiber quality losses and decrease leaf trash and stain, which further reduce lint quality. Thus, a basic knowledge of crop development and maturity along with an understanding of the physiology of harvest-aids is necessary in making decisions concerning the effective application of these materials. Successful preparation of a cotton crop for harvest factors in the complexities of crop leaf senescence, boll maturation and the diversity of harvest-aid functions

#### Defoliation Timing:

Cotton defoliation is a sensitive process. For a successful harvest, defoliation must be carefully timed and carried out. Poor defoliation can lower fiber quality, while defoliating too early lowers yield and micronaire. Defoliating too late increases the likelihood of boll rot and lint damage or loss due to weathering. Late defoliating also increases the possibility that defoliant activity will be inhibited by lower temperatures

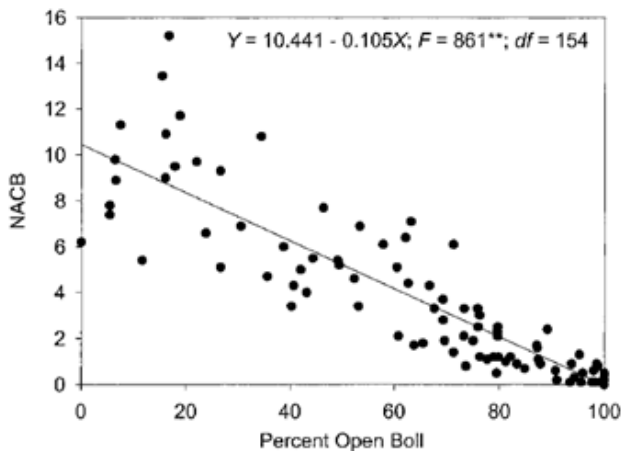
Three ways to determine crop maturity and defoliation timing:

- 60 to 75% open bolls (only 60 for uniform crop)
- Sharp Knife – cotton strings when boll is cut
  - Seed are fully developed (brown coat & cotyledons)
- NACB – 4 or less (around 3 days per node)

There is often a relationship between percent open bolls in the canopy and the number of nodes between the uppermost first position cracked boll and uppermost first position harvestable boll (NACB). The chart below to the right shows predicted percent open bolls to NACB (60% = 4.1 NACB).

## Relationship between NACB & % Open Bolls

(Bednarz et al. 2002)



| <b>% Open Bolls</b> | <b>NACB</b> |
|---------------------|-------------|
| <b>30</b>           | <b>7.3</b>  |
| <b>40</b>           | <b>6.2</b>  |
| <b>50</b>           | <b>5.2</b>  |
| <b>60</b>           | <b>4.1</b>  |
| <b>70</b>           | <b>3.1</b>  |
| <b>80</b>           | <b>2.0</b>  |
| <b>90</b>           | <b>1.0</b>  |
| <b>100</b>          | <b>0</b>    |

Fig. 1. Nodes from the uppermost first sympodial position cracked boll to the uppermost harvestable boll (NACB) vs. percent open boll in harvest timing studies conducted at the University of Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station in 1998, 1999, and 2000. \*\*Denotes significance at the  $P = 0.01$  level.

## Harvest Aid Functions:

There are four basic functions of harvest aids when applied to cotton. Each process may or may not be required to prepare cotton harvest. An understanding is needed of these processes in order to properly determine products and rates to be chosen.

1. Removal of Mature Foliage
2. Removal of Juvenile Foliage
3. Boll Opening
4. Regrowth Suppression

The first two functions are considered to be involved with defoliation. Defoliation or leaf abscission is a natural plant process. The problem is this natural leaf drop does not occur simultaneously throughout the plant canopy, or in time to effectively facilitate mechanical harvest. Therefore, producers must manipulate the plant to drop its leaves in a relatively short period of time.

While the leaf abscission process is quite complex, it can be simplified as being governed by two major hormones within the plant, auxin and ethylene. Auxin is a growth-promoting hormone that stimulates leaf growth and development. Ethylene can be classified as a senescence or ripening hormone that causes leaf drop. Leaves fall from the plant once ethylene moves from the leaf blade to the base of the petiole and stimulates the formation of an abscission layer. The amount of auxin or ethylene present in the leaves of the cotton plant is related to leaf age. Younger leaves have a more elevated level of auxin, while older leaves have lower levels of auxin and higher levels of ethylene. This is why older leaves are more conditioned for defoliation than younger leaves. Furthermore, because of the hormone balance of younger leaves, low rates of harvest aids often have no effect, and higher rates may actually kill the leaf, leading to desiccation and leaf sticking. Eventually, almost all the leaves on a cotton plant age so they will abscise naturally. However, producers can manipulate these hormone levels so all the leaves abscise at the same time. When harvest-aids are applied ethylene levels artificially increase so the abscission process begins.

All cotton harvest-aids can be classified into two modes of action, herbicidal and hormonal. Herbicidal harvest-aids injure the leaf, stimulating the production of ethylene. Hormonal harvest-aids increase the ethylene concentration in the leaves without causing any injury. Product selection and application rates should be adjusted to match environmental conditions as they change during the harvest season in order to reduce occurrence of leaf desiccation.

**Types of Defoliant:**

1. Herbicidal defoliant

- Tribufos (Folex)
  - Injures leaf below cuticle, causing stress which stimulates ethylene production
- P.P.O. INHIBITING HERBICIDES
  - Destruits cell membranes, causing ethylene production
- Carfentrazone (Aim), Pyraflufen ethyl (ET), Flumiclorac (Resource), Flutiacet-methyl (Blizzard)

2. Hormonal defoliant

- Ethephon (Prep, etc.)
  - Increases production of ethylene, leading to leaf drop
  - Accelerated boll opening
    - Finish 6 Pro – ethephon + cyclanilide
    - FirstPick – ethephone + urea sulfate
- Thidiazuron (Dropp, Freefall, etc.)
  - Enhances production of ethylene and inhibits auxin transport
  - Inhibits regrowth
    - Ginstar – thidiazuron + diuron

**PERFORMANCE RATING OF HARVEST AIDS BY FUNCTION**

| COMMON NAME (BRAND NAME)                      | FUNCTION                  |                             |              |                      |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------------|
|   | Removal of Mature Foliage | Removal of Juvenile Foliage | Boll Opening | Regrowth Suppression |
| Ethephon (Prep, numerous brands)              | F-G                       | F                           | E            | P                    |
| Ethephon + Cyclanilide (Finish)               | G-E                       | F-G                         | E            | F                    |
| Thidiazuron (Dropp, FreeFall, TDZ)            | G-E                       | G                           | P            | G-E                  |
| Thidiazuron + Diuron (Ginstar, Adios, Cutout) | G-E                       | G-E                         | P            | G-E                  |
| Tribufos (Def, Folex)                         | G-E                       | P-F                         | P            | P                    |
| PPO Inhibitors (Aim, ET, Resource, Blizzard)  | G                         | F                           | P            | P                    |

**Applications:**

Most harvest aid materials do not translocate or move very far within the plant. Therefore, application coverage is important. To ensure adequate foliar coverage use the proper spray pressure, ground speed and nozzle size in order to apply the desired spray volume in accordance of label instructions.

WATER VOLUME CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT OVERALL PERFORMANCE, THE MORE WATER THE BETTER (SHOOT FOR 15 GPA)

Be sure to consider harvest when making defoliant applications and treat enough acres to anticipate harvesting the crop 10 to 14 days after application. Leaf drop should start in about four days and be complete in about 10 days.

Rainfall occurring after applications can affect defoliant activity. Be sure to consider weather forecasts when making applications and pay attention to rain-free periods of particular products. Thidiazuron is of particular concern, since it requires a 24 hour rain-free period.

See the two tables below from the “2014 Mid-South Cotton Defoliant Guide” written by Darrin M. Dodds, Daniel B. Reynolds, L. Thomas Barber, and Tyson. B. Raper for use details and activity of selected defoliants and desiccants. [http://www.mississippi-crops.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014-Cotton-Defoliation-Guide\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mississippi-crops.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014-Cotton-Defoliation-Guide_Final.pdf)

**Table 2.** Use pattern and expected activity for defoliants and desiccants.

| Harvest Aid <sup>1</sup> | Labeled Broadcast Rate/Acre | Max. Use per Season | Rainfree Period (hours) <sup>2</sup> | Pre-Harvest Interval (Days) | Estimated min. temp. | Mature leaves | Juvenile growth | Re-growth prevention | Boll opening |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Thidiazuron® SC          | 1.6-6.4 oz                  | 9.6 oz              | 24                                   | 5                           | 65 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Excellent            | None         |
| Ginstar®                 | 6.4-16 oz                   | 16 oz               | 12                                   | 5                           | 60 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Excellent            | None         |
| Folex® 6                 | 16-24 oz                    | 24 oz               | 1                                    | 7                           | 60 F                 | Excellent     | Fair            | Poor                 | None         |
| Aim®                     | 0.5-1.6 oz                  | 3.2 oz              | 8                                    | 7                           | 55 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Poor                 | None         |
| Display                  | 1.0 oz                      | 2 oz                | 8                                    | 7                           | 55 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Poor                 | None         |
| ET®                      | 1.5-2.75 oz                 | 5.5 oz              | 1                                    | 7                           | 55 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Poor                 | None         |
| Sharpen™                 | 2.0 oz                      | 2.0 oz              | 1                                    | 5                           | 55 F                 | Excellent     | Excellent       | Poor                 | None         |
| Ethephon                 | 21-42 oz                    | 42 oz               | 6                                    | 7                           | 60 F                 | Fair          | Poor            | Poor                 | Excellent    |
| Finish® 6 Pro            | 21-42 oz                    | 42 oz               | 6                                    | 7                           | 60 F                 | Excellent     | Poor            | Fair                 | Excellent    |
| Glyphosate <sup>3</sup>  | 11-44 oz                    | 44 oz               | 4                                    | 7                           | 55 F                 | Fair          | Fair            | Excellent            | None         |
| <b>Desiccants</b>        |                             |                     |                                      |                             |                      |               |                 |                      |              |
| Paraquat                 | 3.1-32                      | 32                  | 30 min.                              | 3                           | 55 F                 | Fair          | Excellent       | Poor                 | Fair         |
| Sodium Chlorate          | 4.5 # ai                    | N/A                 | 24                                   | 7                           | 55 F                 | Fair          | Fair            | Poor                 | None         |

<sup>1</sup> Addition of spray adjuvants may enhance defoliation during cold temperatures or when leaves are tough from drought-stressed conditions. However, adjuvants may increase leaf desiccation during the early season when temperatures are warm.

<sup>2</sup> Expected rainfree periods are estimates only and may or may not be exact. Other conditions, including temperature, moisture and crop status, will play a role in product performance.

<sup>3</sup> Non-glyphosate tolerant (Roundup Ready Flex®; Glytol®/Liberty Link™) varieties only.

There are a many things to consider when making defoliant decisions.

One of which relates to label restrictions for planting small grains following applications. Be sure to check particular labels for information if planning to plant small grains after cotton harvest. See the table on the right for selected products.

**Comments on Additives:**

Refer to manufacturer’s recommendations. Consider potential negative effects with increased leaf desiccation. Hot temperatures can increase potential for leaf desiccation and possible fiber quality deductions. Unless a label requirement, USE AT OWN RISK.

**Table 1.** Label restrictions for planting small grains following harvest aid application in cotton.

| Harvest Aid     | Small Grain Re-Crop Interval |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Thidiazuron®    | 14 days                      |
| Ginstar®        | 1 month                      |
| Folex® 6        | None                         |
| Aim®            | None                         |
| Display™        | None                         |
| ET®             | None                         |
| Sharpen®        | None                         |
| Glyphosate      | None                         |
| Finish® 6 Pro   | 1 month                      |
| Ethephon        | 1 month                      |
| Paraquat        | None                         |
| Sodium Chlorate | None                         |

**Specific Recommendations:**

For particular defoliant tank-mixture recommendations visit the UGA Pest Management Handbook (pages 226 – 235) at <http://www.ent.uga.edu/pest-management/Commercial-Cotton.pdf>

In the UGA cotton defoliant section of the handbook, recommendations are broken up two different ways. First, a separate section is available for each “season” or relative range of temperatures. This is done to account for effectiveness of products related to temperature. Another way the recommendations are organized relates to harvest aid functions needed to get the crop ready. For more information on these recommendations and how to incorporate them into your operation, please contact your local UGA Cooperative Extension office.

Although there a lot of tank-mixture options for cotton defoliation, one mixture utilizes three products and has become one of the most common and effective treatments in Georgia. This “three-way” mix contains ethephon to open bolls, tribufos to remove mature foliage, and thidiazuron to remove juvenile tissue and prevent regrowth. The table on the right contains rates for each product based on seasonal temperature.

**“Three-way” Defoliation Mixtures**

| Season (Temperatures)                          | Ethephon (Prep)                        | Thidiazuron (Dropp)  | Tribufos (Folex)   |
|--|--|----------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Early Season</b><br>(highs >90, lows >70)   | <b>21 to 24 oz</b><br>(1.33 to 1.5 pt) | <b>1.6 to 2.5 oz</b> | <b>6 to 12 oz</b>  |
| <b>Mid-Season</b><br>(highs 80<89, lows 60<70) | <b>24 to 32 oz</b><br>(1.5 to 2.0 pt)  | <b>2 to 2.3 oz</b>   | <b>8 to 12 oz</b>  |
| <b>Late-Season</b><br>(highs <80, lows <60)    | <b>32 – 42 oz</b><br>(2.0 to 2.67 pt)  | —                    | <b>16 to 20 oz</b> |

Ethephon = rates increase with cooler temps, less effective, need more boll opening  
 Thidiazuron = rates increase with cooler temps, less activity, increase rate with more regrowth, more green < activity when low is less than 65 F for 3 days  
 Tribufos = increase rate with cooler temps, too high can desiccate, need more later

In cases where weeds are present at harvest, some cotton defoliant are products that have herbicidal activity on particular pests. See the table below from the UGA Pest Management Handbook for specific recommendations.

**HARVEST AID WEED MANAGEMENT**

| PRODUCT COMMON NAME   | BROADCAST RATE/ ACRE                                       | REMARKS AND PRECAUTIONS<br><i>The rates below are given in the broadcast amount per acre unless otherwise noted.</i>   |
|---|--|--|
| <i>carfentrazone</i><br>Aim EC  | 1 oz.  | Add 1% v/v crop oil.<br>Effective on morningglory, coffee senna, and tropical spiderwort.  |
| <i>carfentrazone + fluthiacet-methyl</i> Display                      | up-1 oz.   | Limited data, adhere to label restrictions, use precaution.  |
| <i>glyphosate</i><br>(numerous brands)                                | 1.2-2 pt.  | Use in combination with Def/Folex, dimethipen (Harvade) and/or ethephon.<br><br>Glyphosate provides fair regrowth suppression of cotton. However, glyphosate WILL NOT provide regrowth suppression when applied to RF cotton. See specific labels for product rates. |
| <i>paraquat</i><br>Gramoxone Max, Firestorm, or Parazone              | 1-4 oz.  | Use in combinations with standard defoliation applications. May cause crop desiccation and damage to unopened bolls.   |
| Gramoxone Inteon  | 3-5 oz.  |  |
| <i>pyraflufen ethyl</i><br>ET   | 1.5 oz.  | Add 0.5% v/v crop oil when temperatures are above 90°F.<br>Add 1% v/v crop oil when temperatures are 89°F or below.<br>Effective on morningglory.  |
| <i>Follow-up Treatments</i> Desiccants<br>paraquat or sodium chlorate | See “Desiccants for Cotton Harvest Preparation” next page. |  |