

# Rice Program Encourages Research-Backed Decisions

By Robert H. Wells

When Leflore County rice farmer Watson Pillow saved money avoiding additional fungicide expenses and still received excellent results, he knew that he was in the RITE program.

RITE, or Rice Improvement through Technology and Education, is a program funded by rice growers' check-off dollars and initiated by the Mississippi State University Extension Service and the Mississippi Rice Promotion Board.

Nathan Buehring, an Extension rice specialist based at MSU's Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville, coordinates the program, which is completing its second year in 2006.

"The biggest benefit I get from the program is finding out the best ways to manage my inputs," Pillow said. "Nathan will let me know if research shows that something doesn't pay."

The RITE program was created to maximize profits and yields on Mississippi rice while reducing input costs.

"When we put things into the field, we've got data to prove that it's going to work," Buehring said. "We're not going to go out on a limb and risk spending money that may or may not pay off."

A second component of the program is the verification of rice research performed in Stoneville.

"The RITE program takes the research from a small-scale plot system and puts it out into a larger scale," Buehring said. "We can do a lot of things in a small plot, but making it work in a large field situation can be two totally different things."

Buehring had eight fields enrolled in the program in 2006. Fields stay enrolled for two years, and new ones cycle in as old ones cycle out.

"It's basically a first-come, first-serve basis," Buehring said. "If someone is interested in enrollment, I will put them on my list."

Producers enrolled in the RITE program agree to supply all the inputs, and Buehring provides consultation.

The rice specialist works with area agents and fellow researchers to provide support for the program. Problems encountered in RITE fields become potential future research topics.

"Some problems with sulfur deficiencies were identified in the RITE fields this year," said Tim Walker, an MSU agronomist in Stoneville who specializes in rice production. "Those will go into research probably next year."

Yields have been good to excellent in RITE fields for 2006, Buehring said, with the lowest yield being 172 bushels an acre. Some fields produced more than 200 bushels an acre. The National Agricultural Statistics Service is predicting Mississippi yields to average 153.3 bushels per acre this year.

"Last year, the highest yield we had in a RITE field was 165 bushels, although there were hurricanes and other factors going into those yields," Buehring said.

The specialist said expenses will be up this year due to the increased price of some chemicals and the extra pumping needed to combat the drought. However, he said the RITE fields appear to be on par with the state average in rice production expenses.

Fields enrolled in 2006 ranged across the Mississippi Delta from Tunica to Leflore and Washington counties. They varied in location, tillage systems, rotation patterns and varieties.

Buehring scouts RITE fields a minimum of once a week throughout the growing season, and producers are urged to contact the rice specialist if any problems arise between scouting dates.

Recommendations are made on a field-by-field basis and are based on the specific needs of the individual field.

"The ultimate goal within this program is to increase Mississippi rice yields and profits," Buehring said.

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