



# Area 5 Spotlight

## Cultivating Tomorrow:

### *Alabama's Irrigation Initiative Reshaping Wiregrass Region*

The drought of 2023 has been hard on Alabama's farmers and cattlemen with 95 percent of the state experiencing moderate to exceptional drought conditions. Forty-three of Alabama's 67 counties are experiencing extreme conditions triggering qualification for federal livestock forage assistance. To exacerbate the situation, only six percent of Alabama's agricultural land is currently under irrigation. It is a stark reminder that while agriculture thrives in our state, it remains remarkably vulnerable to the unpredictable whims of weather. However, a state and federal partnership designed to convert rain-fed farmland to irrigated farmland could bring long-term relief to Alabama producers.

The Alabama Irrigation Initiative, launched by the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee (ALSWCC) in partnership with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service aims to address the challenges posed by unpredictable weather patterns in the state of Alabama. The initiative focuses on increasing the percentage of irrigated farmland in the state by encouraging the adoption of water-saving irrigation systems and techniques. Some of these methods include drip irrigation, micro irrigation, and center pivot irrigation. By using these water-efficient practices, farmers can optimize water use improve plant health, making their agricultural practices more sustainable.

The initiative started in 2019 in the Middle Tennessee River and expanded into the Choctawhatchee and Pea River (Choc-Pea) watersheds of southeastern Alabama in 2021. Earlier this year, the Middle Alabama River Basin was added to the program.





*Barbour County Farmer Andy McRae illustrates irrigated versus non-irrigated corn.*

To qualify for the initiative, farmers must have access to proper power and water resources and demonstrate a conservation ethic in their farming practices. The program aims to promote sustainable land management, prevent soil erosion, and protect water quality in the state. Farmers interested in the program can contact Kathy Gotcher at [kathy.gotcher@swcc.alabama.gov](mailto:kathy.gotcher@swcc.alabama.gov)

For farmers in the wiregrass region, like Henry County Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor Johnny Lee, the Alabama Irrigation Initiative is a welcomed relief. The sandy clay soil of the Choc-Pea watershed has low water-holding capacity, making irrigation a crucial factor for crop survival during dry spells.

“With the intermittence of showers throughout the summer, irrigation can be the saving factor when you hit a two-week drought,” Lee said. “It can be the determining factor between making a crop and having a total loss for the year.”

That sentiment was echoed by Andy McRae, a 30-year Barbour County row crop farmer and cattle producer who is participating in the initiative. McRae has been using his new system, which includes two pivots, to irrigate 117 acres of corn and soybeans. McRae said after years of “praying for rain,” this system fills in the gap during periods of drought. He also said the water-efficient low-volume, low-pressure irrigation nozzles ensure he is not wasting any water.

Alabama’s Irrigation Initiative serves as an important resource for farmers who have not been eligible for other conservation incentive programs in the past. One key aspect of the program is that it supports the installation of new irrigation systems, with a focus on covering all components of installation, including drilling wells and supplying power to systems. The program provides a maximum of \$250,000 per producer for the system’s installation. It also includes an Irrigation Water Management component that includes weather station, soil moisture sensor, flow meter and a three-year subscription from an irrigation vendor to assist producers in knowing when and how much water to deliver to the crop.

Henry County farmer Lewie Helms, who operates a family-owned farm with his two sons, is grateful for the initiative. Helms uses the system for “timely watering” when faced with drought conditions. His project included a well and one center pivot covering 80 acres. He is in the process of applying for three more pivots to irrigate an additional 100 acres.

“My hope is through good management practices, coupled with irrigation, this farm will be viable for years to come,” Helms said.