

# Grower Expands Technology Use



Excerpt from Cotton Grower  
December 2002

By Dan Bryant

AS COST MANAGEMENT BECOMES NO less critical than productivity, cotton growers like Tony Azevedo of Stratford, CA, depend increasingly on equipment with automated, precision guidance from satellites.

Azevedo, farm manager of Stone Land Company, has employed technology like AutoFarm's AutoSteer systems on the farm. He plans to add four more units to the two he's been using on the 10,000-acre operation, half of which is usually planted to cotton.

The grandson-in-law of veteran cotton industry leader Jack Stone, Azevedo has recently been assuming management of the ranch from his father-in-law, Bill Stone. But his experience with AutoSteer goes back to the fall of 2000 when he started using two units on tractors for Blair Ground Service, his own custom disking, listing, and application operation, separate from the Stone enterprise.

His clientele includes growers in the Southern San Joaquin Valley and coastal counties and he now uses five units and two portable base stations to link tractors with satellites.

AutoFarm technicians showed him how to use the equipment in about an hour, and then he quickly trained his drivers. "Drivers were skeptical of it right-off-the-bat, but after two or three passes across the field, they picked it up fast and realized what it can do," he recalls.

Even Azevedo was a little cautious at first and kept his experienced drivers on tractors for a few days just in case something went wrong with the hands-off systems. But he had no problems with the systems.

"The performance has been excellent. Before we got the systems, we had to rely on the marker arm to center the next pass and a driver that could drive very straight. We couldn't do more than 100 to 120 acres a day, and it all had to be in daylight. Now we can work 24 hours a day, even in fog, and we do twice the acreage."

AutoSteer is accurate within an inch across a typical field, a sharp contrast to the most experienced, hawk-eyed operators, whose accuracy ranges from two to five inches. "The only thing the driver has to do is turn the tractor around at the end of the field, and the system takes it from there."

On a half-section block, he says, "we could add several rows to it by more accurate spacing. We farm eight-row, 40-inch cotton, and we use a six-row harvester, so precision, without the odd spacing of guess rows, is essential."

He also uses the systems for chiseling to avoid the need for touching up wedges along the edge of a field with additional passes. "The high accuracy means greater efficiency. A half-section that used to take 80 hours now takes only 60 hours, for 25 percent more efficiency."

He's beaten that with disking. A job that took 36 hours conventionally can now be done in 24, for a 33 percent gain in efficiency. He reduced the number of drivers for disking from 12 in 2001 to eight in 2002.

"So far," he says, "we've done disking, listing and chiseling with AutoSteer with our big Caterpillars on the ranch, and we've used AutoFarm's AutoDataLogger to compile maps for the entire ranch.

"I plan to buy four more AutoSteer units for the ranch this fall, and we will use those on our wheeled Internationals for cotton planting and cultivating next year."

Along with those systems, he will buy AutoFarm Switch Kits to make rapid changes of the solid-state computers and touch screen monitors



Stratford, CA, cotton grower Tony Azevedo is reducing listing and other costs with a fleet of tractors guided by AutoSteer GPS guidance.

from one tractor to another.

For planting, Azevedo says the guidance systems will be most important in reducing fatigue for his drivers, who will concentrate more on the planter and not worry about steering accurately.

"It will be much easier for them at cotton planting time. After doing it the conventional way all day, they were very tired. We run 14 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week for about three weeks of planting."

In addition to labor savings, considering wear and tear on tracks, bearings and disk blades, fuel, and less hours of use, he figures the new units will pay for themselves during the first year.

In the near future, he says, "Instead of running eight tractors conventionally, with these units we might be able to run six or seven and work 10-hour shifts with less overtime."