Pay Attention To Contract Specifications And Buyer Suggestions

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Tobacco marketing contracts are becoming increasingly more specific on how the crop should be grown, cured, and prepared for market. In addition to seeing the final cured product at delivery, buyers are also asking growers to share with them fairly extensive production records in some cases. Although dark tobacco growers have been accustomed to providing buyers with crop production information for several years, this concept is new to most burley growers. There are several reasons why buyers are asking for more information about each crop. The impending regulation of tobacco by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has tobacco buying companies wondering what regulation will mean to their business and to the growers from whom they purchase tobacco. Regulations will likely restrict certain additives used in tobacco during processing and manufacturing and also limit levels of certain constituents in the raw leaf prior to processing. These constituents may include naturally occurring compounds like nicotine as well as residues from crop protection chemicals. Although regulations may not directly require growers to keep and submit production records, these records may help companies correlate production practices with levels of certain constituents in the raw leaf. Most companies are trying to be proactive well in advance of regulation by collecting production records and doing more intensive sampling of the crop at delivery, and in some cases before and well after delivery.

Although the net effect of FDA regulation is largely unclear at this time, tobacco buying companies are aware of the need to increase the traceability of each crop they buy. This traceability may include information on production practices from transplant production to curing. Seedlots of seed used for transplants, plant populations in the field, field history, fertilizer and pesticides used, curing barn type and dimensions, and curing and handling practices are just some of the information that may be required. Much of the information buyers are asking of growers can be related to tobacco-specific nitrosamines (TSNAs) and pesticide residues, which may be areas of focus for FDA regulation.

TSNAs are known carcinogens that can be found in cured leaf of all tobacco types. TSNAs are mainly formed during the curing process and so curing practices used are of obvious interest to buyers. The use of LC (low converter) and screened seed, now required by all tobacco buyers in the U.S., has made a significant impact on reducing TSNA in cured leaf of both burley and dark tobacco. Curing practices that increase air movement in the barn and minimize the risk of houseburn in burley or "sweat" in dark tobacco generally result in lower TSNA. Barn design with regard to ventilation and, with dark tobacco particularly, stick spacing in the barn are highly correlated with houseburn/sweat and TSNA. The amount of TSNAs that form during curing may also be influenced by the maturity of the crop at harvest and whether the tobacco got wet or excessively dirty near harvest or prior to housing. Conditioning, takedown, and storage practices also influence TSNA and generally, the higher the moisture content during market preparation, the higher the potential for increased TSNA formation. Tobacco buyers will likely be asking for more records of production practices each year, and will also be collecting more samples from each crop for TSNA analysis. Knowledge of specific curing and market preparation practices that relate to resulting TSNA levels will help buyers to recommend certain practices that could help reduce TSNA from all of their growers.

Buyers are also giving greater attention to pesticide residues in the cured leaf, and are doing more testing of tobacco and visiting with growers about high residues of certain chemicals. Now more than ever, growers should pay particular attention to using only registered pesticides on tobacco and be knowledgeable on maximum use rates, application timings, and preharvest intervals in order to make the most effective applications while minimizing potential residues in the cured leaf. It is anticipated that the number of samples collected for pesticide residue analysis will only increase over the next few years. The use of unregistered pesticides, or use of registered pesticides at excessive rates or at late application timings, is definitely not worth the risk of the buyer finding a residue problem in the crop and the grower potentially losing their marketing contract. Unregistered pesticides are particularly risky as there is no tolerance for them at any level in cured leaf and all contracts specify that only legally registered products be used.

Tobacco growers should adhere to the requirements of their marketing contract and also consider suggestions from company representatives that may not be directly stated on the contract. In this era of no government price support system and increased government regulation of tobacco products, growers are in competition with each other and also with international growers. Growers who can maintain good working relationships with buying companies and provide them with requested information and good quality tobacco, while also achieving good yields and net returns, will be the growers that will remain in tobacco production for many more years. Δ

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