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Proper Market Preparation: A 1996 Update for Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco

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The Virginia dark-fired tobacco industry is at a crossroads in its existence. Decisions made and actions taken in the marketing of our tobacco will help determine the future of the industry. Decreases in product utilization and manufacturer inventories have cut market demand, caused allotment reductions, and eroded grower income. Large pool stocks and the resulting high no-net-cost assessment fee have further reduced profitability in recent years.

On the positive side, buyers of dark tobacco still indicate their interest in Virginia dark-fired tobacco and express a demand for this style of tobacco. The development of the bale marketing package has dramatically reduced the expense of market preparation. Further reductions in the cost of production have occurred with the consolidation of production in fewer growers; resulting in increased average yields and a lower cost per pound.

Virginia dark-fired tobacco is rather unique among the different types of tobacco grown in the United States. The majority (approximately 80 percent) of the annual production is sold in the export market for roll-your-own cigarette blends; therefore, growers must compete with similar tobacco grown in other countries of the world. Higher labor costs cause Virginia dark-fired tobacco to be more expensive than similar styles of foreign-grown tobacco. However, a stable supply of good quality tobacco is the greatest advantage of Virginia dark-fired tobacco over similar tobacco produced elsewhere in the world. Domestic use of Virginia dark-fired tobacco is limited primarily to the manufacture of dry snuff, which primarily utilizes lug-grade tobacco.

Quality tobacco and careful market preparation have been hallmarks of the Virginia dark-fired tobacco industry for decades. The necessity to continue such traditions is increasingly important at this critical time for the industry. Buyers have reported problems with the integrity of some lots of tobacco and the construction of some bales purchased in recent years. A limited number of piles of tobacco have been nested with one bale of lug-grade tobacco along with three bales of leaf tobacco. Less frequent, but of even greater concern, is the nesting of scrap tobacco and foreign matter within bales. The bale package may lend itself more to nesting than tobacco tied in hands. However, any nesting that does occur becomes readily apparent at the processing plant (within days of sale). Nested tobacco creates

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increased downtime for the processing line and therefore increases the cost of the tobacco to the buyer. Although the above instances were rare, **the occurrence of nested tobacco or the perception of any quality problem is detrimental to the future of the Virginia dark-fired tobacco industry**. The actions of a very few can have serious impact on all producers.

Nested tobacco is defined by the USDA AMS Tobacco Grading Service as "any tobacco which has been loaded, packed, or arranged to conceal foreign matter or tobacco of inferior grade, quality, or condition." Nested piles may occur by accident when trucks are unloaded and bale lots prepared for the warehouse floor. Bales should be labeled in the packhouse with the farm grade to enable persons unloading tobacco to easily separate farm-graded tobacco. Growers may want to label as "poor, good, or best" qualities of "lugs (X), thin leaf (C), or heavy leaf (B)."

Ultimately, nested tobacco costs all dark tobacco growers, since the warehouses are owned as a grower cooperative and any nested tobacco that is returned to the warehouse increases operating expenses. Any losses that occur are charged against all members of the cooperative. The Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco Marketing Committee and the Dark-Fired Tobacco Marketing Association have directed that any tobacco found to be nested should be returned to the offending growers. Perhaps the most serious impact of nesting is to the reputation of Virginia dark-fired tobacco.

Baling of Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco

The following is a brief review of Virginia dark-fired tobacco baling. Information on baling dark tobacco is available from your local Extension agent (VCE Publication 436-420, *Baling of Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco*).

The baling of Virginia dark-fired tobacco has been a tremendous economic benefit to growers since adoption of this market package in 1992. Baling has substantially reduced the labor required; and therefore, the cost of preparing tobacco for market. All tobacco other than that used for dry snuff must be "butt-cut" to remove the "leaf flag" (the hard, woody portion of the leaf where it attaches to the stalk). **Users of Virginia fire-cured tobacco are able to effectively and efficiently butt cut baled tobacco only if the leaves are aligned with the butts flush with the ends of the bale**. Handling of the bale for butt cutting is made easier if the bale is properly constructed.

Bale Specifications

1. ***Size*** - 12 inches wide and maximum of 18 inches high. Bale length (36, 40, or 44 inches) may vary according to the size of the tobacco.

2. ***Bale Weight*** - 45 to 60 pounds per bale.

3. Tobacco must be in proper keeping order, free of bruising, and not nested with inferior tobacco or foreign matter.

4. ***Bales must be tied with approved cotton twine.*** Tobacco baling twine is a large diameter, 100 percent cotton with a minimum tensile strength of 150 pounds. Bales must be secured with three strings and ***tied with a knot that can be easily untied and retied*** for inspection of the bale.

The equipment needed for baling includes a bale box modified slightly from that used with burley tobacco and a flake box (see Figure 1). A "flake" is the individual layer of leaves that makes up the bale. The use of flake boxes or a similar device is strongly encouraged and should be considered standard procedure. Flake boxes perform two

important functions considered essential by the processors of Virginia dark-fired tobacco:

1. align the heads of the leaves for efficient removal of butt ends, and

2. provide a uniform amount of tobacco for each layer in the bale.

Bales should contain 10 to 12 alternating flakes or layers of tobacco with a relatively uniform amount in each. Uniformity in the thickness of or number of leaves in each flake is important, since the individual flakes must be separated by hand for processing.

The most common problem with bales of dark tobacco has been improper alignment of leaf butts on the bale ends. This can be largely eliminated through the use of flake boxes prior to placing the leaves into the bale box. There may be a tendency to try to save time by skipping the flake box, stripping leaves from the stalk, and placing them into piles or directly into the baler. However, acceptance of the bale package by the buying interests originally included the use of a flake box to assure that leaf butts will be aligned to within relatively strict tolerance.

From an efficiency standpoint, a grower with a large amount of tobacco would need several sets of flake boxes and two or more bale boxes. This would allow workers to strip leaves and separate them into flake boxes according to farm grade. One worker would then be responsible for removing leaves from the flake boxes and constructing the bales of different grades. This setup would provide improved efficiency in the stripping and baling process and assure that bales

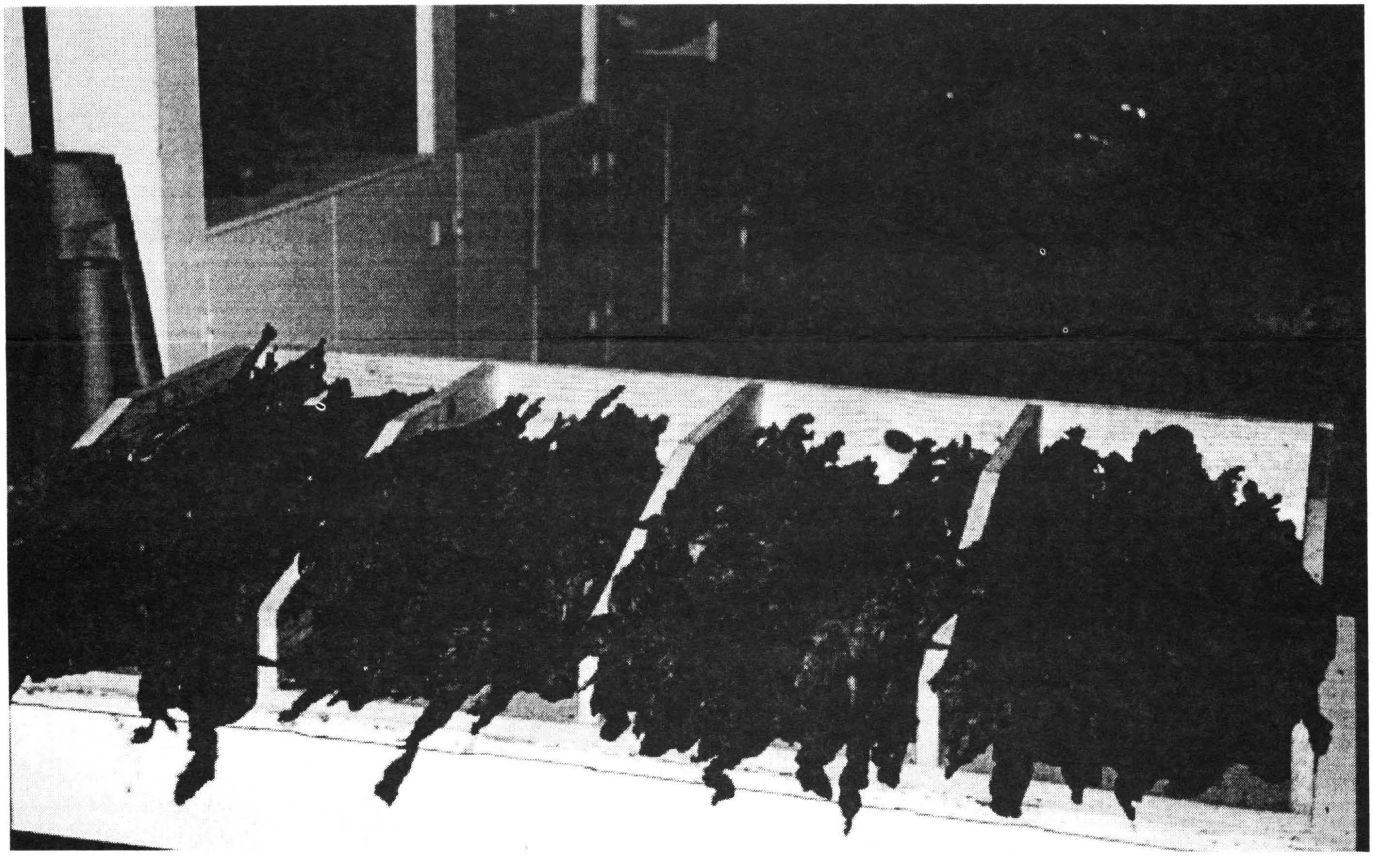

Figure 1. Dark-fired tobacco leaves in a set of flake boxes. Heads must be flush against the back of the boxes.

are constructed properly with regard to aligning leaf butts and bale specifications. Stripping and packing tobacco down in bulk to be baled later results in unnecessary handling and expense, and it also makes proper alignment of leaf butts more difficult.

To prevent mold damage, care must be exercised not to bale tobacco with excessive moisture. Although baled tobacco may actually store better than if tied in hands, bale ends should be on the outside of the stack to allow moisture to pass from the stems. This is particularly important with large acreage growers, as dark-fired tobacco is stripped and baled increasingly earlier to take advantage of available labor.

Tobacco to be Baled

All grades of baled tobacco will receive full price support in bales except for wrapper grades. Wrappers have generally been considered as first or second qualities of C- and B-grade tobacco. Such tobacco should continue to be tied to receive their actual grade and corresponding support price. Otherwise, this tobacco will be graded as third quality. Good quality lug tobacco, which may be sold in loose-leaf form, may receive a higher price if baled. Such tobacco may be purchased in a bale by manufacturers requiring butt cutting or by snuff manufacturers, but in loose-leaf form, it can be sold only as snuff grade.

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