

Tobacco growers vote in favor of auction

BY JACK HUBLEY

LANCASTER — An overwhelming majority of Lancaster County tobacco growers attending last Friday's tobacco marketing meeting at the Guernsey Barn in Lancaster would prefer the auction block to the current method of selling their product.

This fact came to light when 92 percent of those responding to a questionnaire indicated an interest in marketing through an auction. Eighty-nine percent also indicated a willingness to commit their 1985 crop to an auction-type sale.

According to Lancaster County Farmers Association president Earl Newcomer, Pennsylvania's production of some 15 million pounds of Maryland-type 609 tobacco is purchased by southern buyers who traditionally visit farms around the beginning of the year and buy from farmers on a one-to-one basis. Another 10 million pounds of Pennsylvania-type 41 tobacco is sold to local buyers for the cigar and chewing tobacco trade. Though the so-called Maryland type cigarette tobacco is usually higher priced, its lower yield per acre makes it roughly equal in value to Pennsylvania 41 on a per-acre basis, said Newcomer.

Virtually all of the state's tobacco is grown in the eastern part of the state, with roughly 90 percent coming from Lancaster County, he said.

With more than 250 producers in attendance, Friday night's meeting was the largest thus far in a series of meetings that began in January, prompted by producer dissatisfaction with tobacco prices.

A show of hands called for by the evening's keynote speaker, Bill Farrington of the American Farm Bureau, revealed that many farmers had parted with their best Maryland-type tobacco for about \$1.10 per pound. Farmers commonly sold their entire year's production for prices averaging between 85 cents and \$1 per pound.

"If we'd have had an auction system, a lot of tobacco would have brought \$1.50 (per pound)," said Columbia producer B.C. Brubaker, pointing out that Maryland's auction system has proven to be far superior to Pennsylvania's marketing methods.

"What we have now is nothing," Brubaker said bitterly. "Where's the farmer's freedom when a buyer says that his tobacco is too green? What can he do with it? He has to take it like a whipped

puppy."

Maryland's tobacco auctions begin in March, said Newcomer, with auctions running three days a week for about a month. Buyers like to purchase the Pennsylvania-grown Maryland 609 earlier than this so they can concentrate on the Maryland sales, according to Newcomer.

"Some of the Pennsylvania farmers tried to take tobacco to Maryland, but the Maryland farmers don't like it and they try to discourage it," notes Newcomer. "But the Maryland Farm Bureau was very cooperative and even offered to help us with the details of setting up our own auctions," he pointed out.

Presenting an overview of the depressed tobacco market nationwide, the Farm Bureau's Farrington noted that most of Wisconsin's cigar leaf is sold directly out of the barns as well.

"Wisconsin's cigar leaf finished out the year at \$1.10, and that's nothing to be happy about," Farrington said. "But your tobacco changes hands before it gets to the consumer more than about any other place I know of."

"Last year you didn't sell your tobacco, and I don't think I have to tell you that," Farrington said, pointing out that farmers selling out of their barns to individual dealers "gave away" their product.

"The problem with selling this way," continued Farrington, "is that your tobacco never seems to be just what he's (the buyer) looking for. And it never will be."

Lancaster attorney Jim Heinly took the podium to remind Lancaster County farmers that change is possible if farmers demonstrate unity.

"You're the people that tomorrow morning can build a barn and be milking cows in it by tomorrow night," he reminded the predominantly Amish audience.

"And you don't believe that you can change your lot? If you get an auction, you'll have the company up here buying, rather than the hucksters."

One Amish spokesman pointed out that an offer averaging about \$1.05 per pound had prompted him to keep his harvest of Maryland 609 this year.

"We get a lot more labor in 609 because we have to grade it into three grades," he said, pointing out that separating the tobacco into "tops, middles and bottoms," requires extra time and manpower.

For many Amish this labor requirement is filled by enlisting the aid of their traditionally large families. "It's really a good family job and we enjoy it," said the Amishman, "but it's getting to the point where we better have a little more money to continue. I just

hope we can get an auction going," he concluded. "I think we'd really have something."

Without the help of family members, Rothsville grower Carl Schnupp finds labor costs to be prohibitive at current tobacco prices. Schnupp averaged 91 cents for his 10-acre harvest, and paid labor rates of \$6 per hour for spearing and \$4.25 per hour for stripping.

"My own labor figured out to about \$3 an hour," he said. "I don't know what I'm going to do this year."

Urging that Pennsylvania growers band together to implement an auction for the coming season, Farrington emphasized that growers must not allow buyers, "to break up your effort to sell something together. And for those of you who don't join, don't go out there and undersell the market," he concluded.



Lancaster County Farmers Association president Earl Newcomer looks on as Bill Farrington of the American Farm Bureau's tobacco division points out the merits of selling tobacco through an auction.

LCFA needs to hear from you

The Lancaster County Farmers Association is still seeking input from farmers who may not have attended the Feb. 15 meeting and filled out a questionnaire. LCFA president Earl Newcomer requests that growers answer the following questions and submit them to him at Box 174, RD 1, Washington Borough, PA 17582. Phone: 717-872-2646.

- How many acres of Maryland and Pennsylvania-type tobacco do you grow?
- Do you favor an auction over the present method of selling tobacco?
- Would you commit your 1985 Maryland tobacco harvest to be sold at auction?
- Would you like to be involved in planning and setting up an auction?
- If not, can you recommend someone who might be interested?

Farmers see latest in 'green thumb' technology at:

Lancaster County Crops and Soils Day

BY JACK HUBLEY

LANCASTER — Though Pennsylvania farmers are excellent

livestock producers, their crop management practices too often fall short of the mark. This was the

message delivered by Penn State Extension agronomist Melvin Brown, coordinator for the state's

Crop Improvement Associations.

Started by Brown himself in Centre County in 1979, the CIA concept gained momentum rapidly, with 250 farms representing some 50,000 acres currently enrolled in the state's seven associations. About one-third of these farms were signed up in 1984, Brown said.

"This is really a crop management assistance program," Brown emphasized, likening CIA's to the Dairy Herd Improvement Association.

Brown explained that a board of directors employs technicians who visit participating farms twice a month. Technical services include:

- Establishing a crop production recordkeeping system.
- Providing a computerized analysis of production costs.
- Planning production needs including seed fertilizer, herbicides and insecticides.
- Obtaining and interpreting soil, manure and tissue samples.
- Monitoring fields for insects and weeds.
- Conducting plant population and yield checks.
- Making accurate field measurements.
- Sprayer calibration

"Our objective is to increase farm profits on individual farms,"

Brown said, noting that the size and complexity of today's operations make it impractical for farmers to realize their full cropping potential without help. "I think the time has come for this kind of management association," he said.

Also on the program was Penn State Extension agronomist Dr. Sidney Bosworth, introducing the 1984 Alfalfa Variety Report. A joint effort between the Penn State Extension and the USDA's Pasture Lab at University Park, the report provides yields as well as stand and disease ratings on 57 alfalfa varieties.

The information is the culmination of experimental trials run at the Rock Springs and Hershey research facilities since 1978. Those interested in obtaining a copy should contact their county extension offices.

In addition to speaking on alfalfa varieties, Bosworth talked about the value of grasses as an alfalfa companion crop.

Bosworth noted that many factors, such as species, variety, and seeding date, will affect the success of a legume-grass mixture, and he emphasized that farmers should manage for the legume, not the grass.

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Lancaster County's Five Acre Corn Club winners for this year are (back row, left) Luke Brubaker, accepting for Brubaker Bros., Mount Joy; Harold Brubaker, Strasburg, also the recipient of the three-year award; Dennis Eby, Gap; (front, left) Galen Kopp, Mount Joy; and Lamar Miller, Manheim. Not pictured are Kerry and Deborah Boyd of Ephrata.