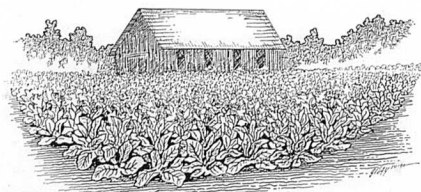


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Bracken growers reflect status across Burley Belt

By RANDY GREENE

For the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association
LEXINGTON — "Opponents of the U.S. tobacco program, such as the health lobbyists and the GATT negotiators, often overlook tobacco's economic impact throughout the eight-state Burley Belt," said John M. Berry, Jr., president of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association.

"But anyone who believes that the tobacco program — or many of America's small rural counties — would somehow survive in the free market is simply dreaming," Berry said.

"During the 1980s, the farm depression took its toll on Kentucky," Berry explained. "But we have been spared the devastation it brought to many other states. The reason? We have a supply-management and price-support program for our tobacco. Although our price was cut in 1986 to a level at which we couldn't make a decent profit, it was high enough to keep most of our farmers from going broke."

Similarly, articles about Bracken County in this series illustrate the BTGCA president's concern by showing how dependent such counties really are upon tobacco production and sales.

How typical is Bracken County?

But is Bracken representative of other agricultural communities across the eight-state Burley Belt?

It certainly does not compare to larger Kentucky counties, like Fayette. Lexington-area growers garnered \$14 million from 1989 burley sales, but that contributed only 5.4 percent to Fayette's total farm receipts, according to Andy Peak, a central Kentucky farm appraiser.

And Fayette as well as 22 other Kentucky counties do have higher effective quotas to grow burley than the U.S. Department of Agriculture allots to Bracken County — based on 1990 USDA figures that set Bracken's quota at about 6.44 million pounds.

But even though Bracken growers rank 25th in Kentucky in terms of quota, they earned 19th place in 1989 for overall burley production, compared to the other 119 tobacco-producing counties in the state, according to the Kentucky Agricultural Statistics Service.

So while farm incomes in Kentucky's larger counties may be less tobacco-dependent, Bracken growers probably fare better than tobacco farmers in most of the smaller counties across the Commonwealth.

But are larger counties truly independent from the loss of tobacco dollars? When the New York firm of Clayton & Dubilier bought IBM's Lexington plant in August and announced the gradual elimination of 1,200 jobs, the BTGCA's chief executive officer noted:

"If 1,200 IBM employees earned \$35,000 a year, then this job loss could cost about ten central Kentucky counties including Fayette nearly \$42 million," said Danny McKinney.

"But those same counties probably market 100 million pounds of burley tobacco, valued at about \$160 million, annually," McKinney explained. "So losing tobacco sales for whatever reason in these ten counties could be the equivalent of four times the loss that the IBM layoffs are inflicting."

Bracken vs. other Burley Belt counties

In addition, Bracken growers probably fare better than burley farmers in other states, based on USDA figures that indicate:

✓ Compared to Tennessee — which is second only to Kentucky as America's most productive burley state — Bracken County's effective quota is greater than all but five county allotments in the "Volunteer State."

✓ Bracken's effective quota also exceeds those allotted for Indiana's top tobacco-growing counties of Jefferson and Switzerland, or the quota allotted to Missouri's number-one tobacco-growing county of Platte.

So in many ways, tobacco's role in the Bracken County economy not only mirrors that of many local economies across the Burley Belt, but Bracken growers may also have some advantages.

Their most obvious one is natural.

Two strong rivers border the county — the Ohio to the north and the North Fork of the Licking along its southern reaches.

And both rivers provide Bracken farmers with lots of productive bottomland and more than ample water to irrigate crops, according to David Appelman, a

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