



Coming 'clean' with tobacco

By RICHARD DAVIS

In recent years, tobacco growers have been hearing more and more about pesticide-residue-clean tobacco, or PRC, and consequently, more growers are expressing an interest in learning about PRC and organic tobaccos.

"We know that MH [maleic hydrazide] residues are a big concern for our European customers," North Carolina State University tobacco specialist Loren Fisher said at the annual meeting of the Tobacco Growers of North Carolina earlier this year. "It may be the most important pesticide residue that we work with in the future. And we know that our largest export competitor, Brazil, does

Key Points

- More customers are concerned about chemical residues in tobacco.
- It is feasible to grow residue-clean tobacco if premiums are offered.
- Tommy Blizzard's operation is having success with PRC tobacco.

not use MH on their tobacco." Domestically, Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Co. is using organic and PRC tobacco. (Their terminology is Purity Residue Clean tobacco.) When the North Carolina Tobacco Tour pulled into Greene County on July 22, grower Tommy Blizzard discussed his experience growing PRC for Santa Fe.

MAKING DO: Tommy Blizzard has discovered that he really can get along without systemic sucker control. It takes a lot of contacts and labor, but he gets paid a premium for his efforts.

The Blizzard operation originally grew standard tobacco, but now it has added 115 acres of PRC for Santa Fe.

"It is a project we have now been participating in for about four or five years," Blizzard said. "I'd say the main difference is that we can't use any kind of systemic sucker control — no Prime+ [flumetralin], no MH, on PRC tobacco. So it requires quite a bit of labor to carry this crop all the way through to completing the harvest."

There are some other products Santa Fe doesn't allow growers to use on tobacco, he noted. Considering the rapid spread of tomato spotted wilt virus, in his estimation the most important of these is Admire 2F, or imidacloprid. Since Blizzard couldn't use Admire on his PRC tobacco this year, that tobacco had a loss of 11% due to TSWV vs. 3% to 6% in his standard tobacco.

There are also quite a few other chemicals that are not allowed for use on PRC, but Blizzard said those don't really hamper his program much.

"They [Santa Fe] pay a pretty reasonable premium for PRC," Blizzard said. "If you can achieve yields in the 2,400- to 2,600-pound range with PRC, I think it is profitable for producers to participate in the program. Now if you fall below 2,200 pounds, with the extra work that goes into producing PRC, it is not something you want to do."

Blizzard said this year, with a dry weather crop, he may have been just as well off if he'd planted all of his acres in standard tobacco.

"But last year we had a great crop of PRC," he added. "We produced over 2,900 pounds to the acre — and got the bonus on it. Of course, that makes you get a little greedy when you have a year like that, so we expanded our acreage of it a little bit this year."

Going PRC route is not for suckers

If he can't use systemic sucker control products, how does Tommy Blizzard control the suckers in his PRC tobacco?

"Contact, contact, contact," he says, laughing.

His local county Extension agent, Louis Johnson, adds, "And labor, labor, labor."

Last year, from start to finish, Blizzard applied a total of eight to 10 contacts on most of his PRC tobacco.

"This year, due to the dry weather conditions, our tobacco has already been sprayed six times with contacts [by July 22], and if we take it all the way through harvest, it may be 12 or 13 contacts," he says. "We start off our sucker control program just like anyone with standard tobacco would. Then about the third contact, we'll increase it. Normally after the fourth or fifth contact, we can decrease the percentage of solution, and we can also usually drop back to a 10-, 11- or 12-day cycle instead of every five to seven days."

"One thing I've learned is that you can have it clean, and you can check it every eight to nine days, and everything may look fine, but if you get an inch and a half of rain, you'd better put your sprayer in the field, right then, the next day, because that new sucker growth is coming."

For worm control, PRC growers are limited to Orthene and DiPel. They can use Devrinol herbicide and Telone C.

Blizzard chooses the variety he believes gives him the highest quality.

He feels he has a reasonable amount of freedom and control growing PRC for Santa Fe.

"It is all about quality with them," he says. "If you've got a history of producing the kind of quality they are looking for, then they don't get much into the decision-making process as far as varieties are concerned."

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DOING THINGS BIG: Corey and Susan Rice of the Pinehurst, N.C., area, a mother-and-son business team, believe in doing things in a big way. Susan recently received the largest truffle ever imported to America. The giant truffle from Umbria, Italy, weighs in at 3.5 pounds and is 6 inches long. Susan and Corey are currently in the process of building Black Diamond French Truffles Inc., which will include the largest black diamond winter truffle farm in the U.S. BDFT will eventually be the site of 200 acres of truffles, a rare food product that can bring remarkable sums on the market. The truffle harvest is three years away. Until then, the Rices and their business associates will be importing and selling summer truffles to the Whole Foods grocery chain, starting in August. Read more about BDFT in the February 2008 issue of *Carolina-Virginia Farmer*.