

Big bales enter burley market

Larger packages save labor on the farm and in the burley industry
By Paul Denton and Vickie Witcher

By now, most producers have seen burley tobacco sold in the big-bale market package. The big bale is 42 inches by 42 inches by 40 inches and contains 500 to 600 pounds of tobacco.

Flue-cured tobacco farmers have used this bale size for many years. It was introduced in burley three years ago by Philip Morris USA, which has encouraged its contracting farmers to market their tobacco this way.

From the standpoint of the tobacco manufacturing industry, this bale package for burley offers many advantages. It is more uniform in size and density than the traditional unitized package of eight farmer bales, and it is easier to handle, pack in trucks and store.

At the receiving station, it eliminates hand labor for unloading, forming unitized packages and banding. The big bales can be lifted directly off the truck or trailer and placed on the receiving line.

Tobacco stemmies already are set up to handle big bales of flue-cured tobacco, so it simplifies their operation to handle burley the same way.

FARMER ADVANTAGES

The big bale's main advantage to farmers is in labor savings. Burley tobacco continues to be baled by grade, but the need to orient the leaves in the big bale is eliminated, reducing grading time.

Labor crews grade and toss the tobacco into a holding container, which is eventually emptied into the big-bale chamber, spread out, packed in the corners and pressed as appropriate until the



Big balers compress tobacco into a 500- to 600-pound package, measuring 42 inches by 42 inches by 40 inches.

desired bale weight is reached.

Baling and handling time also is reduced because one big bale contains as many as seven traditional-sized 80-pound bales. Once baled, the large bale is transported mechanically, rather than manually, saving much hand labor.

Another potential advantage for farmers is uniformity of bale weight. Most large balers have a built-in scale, so the weight of tobacco in the bale is known precisely. This added advantage removes the guesswork of bale weights and should eliminate the problems of rejected overweight bales, and of light, low-density bales that pack and handle poorly.

One area where some of the labor-saving advantage can be lost is in the handling and temporary storage of loose tobacco before baling. Since most farms will have only one baler, it is not possible to accumulate all stalk positions in balers as tobacco is stripped.

Temporary storage will be required for up to 600 pounds of at least three grades



Big bales reduce labor but require mechanized equipment for handling.

at any given time. This means finding suitable containers for efficient and safe holding of tobacco while stripping, and for efficient movement, temporary storage and loading into the baler.

The stripping room needs to be arranged so moving storage containers in and out is quick and easy. Farmers who have adopted the big bale have tried several different containers, including plastic garbage cans, cardboard boxes of various sizes, and different kinds of large sheets such as the burlap sheets previously used to market flue-cured tobacco.

Different storage methods can work as long as they are durable, light enough to handle, and are not a source of NTRMs, or nontobacco-related materials, and as long as the stripping room, storage and baler location are arranged efficiently to minimize labor.

COST VS. LABOR

Will the savings in labor justify the cost of changing systems? The answer depends on size of operation and total cost involved in switching. The big cost for most farmers is the baler, followed by equipment to handle big bales and modifications to the stripping room.

New prices for big balers are quoted generally in the \$6,000 to \$9,000 range. Investment in handling equipment and stripping room modifications will vary depending on a farmer's existing setup.

Assuming the cost of the baler, handling equipment and stripping room at \$12,000 and spreading the cost over 10 years, some "back of the envelope" economics would give an estimate of \$1,700-per-year cost for depreciation and interest on investment.