

# Labor shortage plagues harvest of burley acres

By WAYNE HARR

**B**URLEY tobacco growers in Tennessee and Kentucky had a bright year in 2006 with prices that pleased most growers and the best average production per acre in several seasons. That bright spot faded for many when a shadow fell on harvest — there was a shortage of labor.

The situation left many growers scratching their heads about what size of a crop to grow in 2007.

Kentucky farmers grew 73,000 acres of burley in 2006, up 3,000 from 2005, with an average production of 2,100 pounds per acre — the highest in five years. Total production is estimated at 153.3 million pounds, according to the Kentucky Agricultural Statistics Service.

Total production in burley producing states is estimated a 217.1 million pounds, up 7% from a year earlier.

## Migrant labor didn't arrive

Across Tennessee, the shortage of labor for harvesting the tobacco crop varied from area to area. Growers accustomed to picking up migrant labor at harvesttime seemed to have the biggest problem. Those who had H-2A worker

## Key Points

- Burley growers hit with 2006 labor shortage may cut back acreage for 2007.
- Tighter Mexican border curbs migrant worker population.
- 2006 burley prices and crop pleased growers; labor shortage pruned profit.

program contracts fared better.

"The migrant workers we normally have available were just not here in 2006," says Paul Denton, University of Tennessee burley tobacco specialist. "The immigration situation and tightening up of the Mexican border — either by reality or fear — has cut down on the number of migrant laborers coming to work."

Denton says other reasons also may have come into play.

"The competition for immigrant labor in the building industry is getting intense," he explains. "Also, another thing that has happened in east Tennessee is that the acreage of tobacco and other farm commodities has gone down so much that there is not as much work as in the past, so migrant workers are not being attracted to the area like they once were."

Denton says some growers still had



**HUGE HARVEST:** The burley tobacco grown by Mark Litzinger in Germantown, Ky., was huge, giving him the best crop he has ever produced. He figures his per-acre average will come close to 3,800 pounds.

tobacco in the field in November when Tennessee got its second freeze.

"This is partly due to labor difficulties and partly due to some growers increasing 2006 production beyond what they were used to managing," he says. "What I am hearing from farmers is that the ones who prepared in advance by lining up enough labor to harvest the amount of tobacco grown did OK."

In Tennessee's largest burley-growing county, Macon County Extension agent Steve Walker says the labor shortage was widespread.

"It did not get desperate, but growers could have used more workers," he says. "The migrant workers who were here kept jumping from farm to farm. There was no loyalty to the grower they were working for. If another grower would pay a few cents more per stick, the workers would go to him."

"The number of growers in our county are dropping, but our acreage is remaining the same," Walker adds. "That means the labor demand is still high or even higher, because growers who dropped out of production were using mostly family labor."

## H-2A workers more dependable

Labor problems for Kentucky growers also varied across the state. Some growers had no problems, while some tobacco did not get harvested.

Producers in the central part of the state had some real labor problems, reports Will Snell, University of Kentucky tobacco economist. In the western part of Kentucky, most of the farmers depend on the H-2A labor program.

H-2A is a federal program designed to help employers bring nonimmigrant

foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature.

"They have used that program for many years and find it is complex with a lot of recordkeeping, but it works," Snell says. "That part of our state is really expanding in tobacco production."

"Now that growers have an opportunity to grow more tobacco due to the large number of farmers who have exited the industry, labor is constraining that opportunity," he says. "It is not only the cost of labor, but also the availability of labor."

Snell says that in addition to the immigrant concerns and a tighter Mexican border, unemployment is low, other industries with easier work and higher pay are creating competition, and a lot of the migrants went south last year to work in areas affected by hurricanes.

Mark Litzinger, who grew 42 acres of burley last year near Germantown in Macon County, is a Kentucky grower who ran into labor problems at harvest. He got his crop in before frost, but it took two weeks longer than normal.

"Usually there is plenty of migrant workers, but for some reason this year they did not come," Litzinger says.

While he increased production 15 acres after the buyout, he is thinking about cutting back to 35 acres this year because of the labor situation.

"I had the best crop this year that I have ever harvested," he says. "We had 20 acres of no-till and it was huge. That may have been part of my labor problem because it was so heavy to handle."

Litzinger is looking into the H-2A worker program before making a final decision about cutting back his crop.



## Labor issue affects planting in 2007

**T**HE reaction of burley tobacco growers to the labor shortage that impacted the 2006 harvest is as varied as the labor problem itself. The labor shortage's effect on growers' planting plans for 2007 remains to be seen.

"With the price of tobacco and a good production year, I thought last summer Tennessee growers would be increasing production in 2007," says Paul Denton, University of Tennessee burley tobacco specialist. "But the labor situation is making me wonder about that."

Regardless of the number of acres, Denton is warning growers that the pick-up crews they have used in the past will become harder and harder to find.

"When a grower gets his tobacco crop in the field and sees he will have a crop to harvest, he should already be lining up his harvesting crew," Denton says. "The real big producers should start earlier."

Will Snell, University of Kentucky tobacco economist, says most growers are waiting to see what will happen with contracts before making 2007 crop decisions.

"During harvest, growers were frustrated with the labor situation, but I think they have been happy generally with prices and are waiting to see if demand increases and there are additional price incentives," he says.

However, Snell agrees with Denton that tobacco growers should be lining up their 2007 labor needs now, especially if they plan on utilizing the H-2A worker program.

"Growers who plan on being in tobacco for the long term and getting larger are going to have to depend upon a readily available, dependable supply of labor such as the H-2A worker program," Snell says. "Family and local labor for large producers is not available."