



## Opposition to tobacco aid expected

Growers could apply for venture money

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- A top official told lawmakers yesterday that there is dissent about a plan to include tobacco among farm ventures getting money historically devoted to helping tobacco farmers move into alternative crops and livestock.

"Over the past few weeks, I've learned the General Assembly, the agricultural community and to some extent the Agricultural Development Board is divided on this issue," Keith Rogers, executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, told a legislative panel.

No one spoke against the idea, and no lawmakers critically questioned it. But disagreement is expected.

The plan -- conceived as a way to help farmers who choose to continue growing leaf in the free market created by last fall's tobacco buyout -- includes a farm-improvement program for tobacco similar to 13 other programs administered by local county councils.

The Agricultural Development Board, which divvies out the state's share of tobacco settlement money, could vote on the proposal at its June meeting. In an interview after yesterday's hearing, board member Dennis Griffin said the board is divided and could vote either way.

### QUICK TAKE

#### Last we knew

A group of Christian County tobacco growers was asking the Agricultural Development Board, which distributes tobacco-settlement money, to allocate funds for tobacco. The money has historically gone to help farmers find alternative crops and livestock.

#### The latest

Several farm groups, including the Kentucky Farm Bureau and the Council for Burley Tobacco, supported the idea at a legislative hearing in Frankfort yesterday.

#### Why it's news

Supporters say creating a program for tobacco farmers would help Kentucky remain a leader in burley tobacco production as a free market takes hold starting this year.

#### What's next

The Agricultural Development Board is expected to vote on the issue at its June meeting.



"We haven't had any input other than those that favor tobacco, so far," Griffin said, then added: "I would have thought today maybe there would have been some other opinions."

Yesterday's meeting was a joint informational hearing of the General Assembly's tobacco task force and agriculture and small-business committee. It was not listed on the Legislative Research Commission's calendar.

Supporters of the plan argue that by funding tobacco, the Agricultural Development Board would give tobacco farmers the same opportunity others have gotten. If approved, the program would come at a pivotal time for growers.

With lower prices for leaf, the state's burley tobacco production is expected to fall 15 percent to 20 percent this year, according to University of Kentucky tobacco economist Will Snell. He expects that burley will be grown on fewer than 10,000 Kentucky farms -- down from about 30,000 farms just three years ago.

And while annual cash receipts for tobacco aren't likely to reach the \$900 million levels of several years ago, Snell said they may settle between \$400 million and \$450 million, keeping tobacco among the leading Kentucky crops.

The Agricultural Development Board is considering a proposal that would allow county councils to allocate money to tobacco farmers in their areas. There is no requirement to prevent counties from spending all their funds on one program -- including a possible new tobacco program.

The proposal would allow farmers to apply for money to buy production equipment such as stripping machines and baling presses plus barns or other facilities to improve the tobacco curing process. The Council for Burley Tobacco and the Kentucky Farm Bureau support it.

Dean Wallace, executive director of the burley council, said the money would especially benefit tenant farmers who have used barns owned by landlords who are leaving tobacco after the buyout.

"If we can create a program where these young people and these tenant farmers can come back in and tap into a resource where they can make their investment into tobacco and move forward, it's going to be viable for the future of Kentucky agriculture," Wallace said.

But Tony Herrington, a Harrison County farmer and Community Farm Alliance board




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member, said he's concerned that any money spent on tobacco may be wasted if farmers build barns and buy new equipment only to watch cigarette makers turn elsewhere to buy leaf.

Herrington also worries about the message such an effort would send to those who might want to reduce the portion of tobacco-settlement money that goes to agriculture. Agriculture receives half of the money Kentucky gets under the 1998 settlement with tobacco companies.

"We're supposed to be diversifying from tobacco with this money," Herrington said in a phone interview yesterday. "I'm not anti-tobacco. I've probably grown 3 million pounds of tobacco in the last 25 years -- and tobacco's been good to me."

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