

“We Look Forward to Being in the Fields”: Tobacco Farmers Look Ahead to Better Year

JOHNSTON COUNTY, N.C. – The seeding is off to a slow start.

A wet February put T.J. Sasser and his team of farmhands at Kornegay Family Farms a couple of weeks behind schedule. It took until the first week of March to seed the last of three greenhouses set aside for tobacco plants.

“It hasn’t really affected us as much as it would have if it had been a month, but no, we did not get a good, early start this year,” he says.

Kim Kornegay LeQuire’s family has grown tobacco, sweet potatoes, and a host of other products in Johnston County for half a century. A diverse portfolio and multi-year tobacco contracts helped insulate her farm from the triple shock of hurricanes, trade wars, and supply chain disruptions that have hit the agriculture sector since 2018.

“You never know. Sometimes prices are better than you think they’re going to be. Sometimes yields are better than you think they’re going to be,” she says.

N.C. State Agricultural Economist Blake Brown says 2021 is on track to be a much better year for North Carolina’s farmers, including tobacco farms.

According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, North Carolina exported \$504 million worth of tobacco in 2017, making it the state’s second-largest agricultural export. A year later, China stopped buying American tobacco as the Trump Administration’s trade war escalated. Now, Brown says Chinese importers have signed on to buy 85 million pounds of tobacco from the United States, more than a quarter of projected exports this year. Brown says any shocks to farmers reverberate throughout the state’s economy, particularly in rural areas.

“It impacts everybody in that community, whether you’re the banker or the equipment dealer or the dry cleaners or the restaurant downtown,” he says.

Assuming exports to China go as planned, Brown says the biggest wild card farmers face, besides weather, is a new 25% tariff levied against American agricultural products by the European Union. He says there is a good chance this will get resolved, as the EU ambassador has indicated the bloc is willing to lift its import duties if the U.S. responds in kind.

Kornegay LeQuire says she’s cautiously optimistic given the trade situation. However the year turns out, she says farming is as much about personal growth as it is about the bottom line.

“We look forward to being in the fields,” she says. “There’s different parts of it that you enjoy more than others. So that’s just what we look forward to is growing something and growing as people and just seeing what happens.”

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