



Plastic Contamination Remains Industry-Wide Focus

Plastic contamination of ginned cotton is extremely detrimental to the global cotton industry as it competes with man-made, synthetic fibers. As the AMS Cotton and Tobacco Program (C&T) continued to identify plastic in an increased number of cotton samples over the past several years, the issue of plastic contamination has garnered intense focus within the U.S. cotton industry. C&T has been actively working with all segments of the U.S. cotton industry to identify the sources of plastic contaminants and with the Program’s cotton classers to ensure accuracy of the grading process.

Tracking the Small but Significant

C&T began tracking bales with plastic contaminants during the 2017 cotton classing season. During the 2017 season, the Program classed 20.4 million samples, of which 2,651 samples (0.00013%) were determined to have plastic contamination. During the 2018 cotton classing season, the number of plastic calls increased to 3,035 out of 17.8 million samples classed (0.00017%). Despite ramping up educational efforts, occurrences of plastic contamination continued to increase during the 2019 classing season. An alarming 4,918 out of approximately 19.4 million samples classed (0.00025%) were determined to have plastic contamination. This increased presence of plastic is a very big concern for U.S. cotton.

To further assist the industry in identifying sources of plastic contaminants, C&T has also been tracking the color of plastic contaminants found in cotton samples submitted. Yellow plastic comprises the bulk of the contamination found – approximately 60-70% of plastic was yellow, 15-25% was pink and 5-10% was black. All the other colors combined make up the remaining 5-8% of plastic identified.

Changes in Reporting Plastic

Prior to the 2018 cotton classing season, C&T classers recorded the presence of plastic in cotton samples as extraneous matter codes “61” or “62” - defined as “other” in the classification results. Based on recommendations from the U.S. cotton industry, C&T changed the grading system for the 2018 crop to include a new code of extraneous matter, specifically “71” or “72” to designate plastic contamination, with 71 being a level one and 72 being a level two designation.

After receiving further recommendations from the cotton industry, C&T has made additional changes in policies related to reporting plastic contamination. When cotton

samples are submitted for a “Review” classification, any original determination of plastic contamination (extraneous matter codes “71” or “72”) will be retained in the Review classification record regardless of the absence or presence of plastic in the Review sample. This change in policy is justified by the fact that plastic is typically not uniformly distributed throughout the bale.

C&T’s Continued Commitment

C&T realizes that every bale containing unidentified plastic that reaches a mill causes significant damage to the industry’s reputation, increases the perceived risk of receiving plastic-contaminated cotton, and threatens the overall value of U.S. cotton. Given the symbiotic relationship between C&T and the U.S. cotton industry, C&T remains firmly committed to 1) accurately identifying plastic contaminants and 2) working with the industry to eliminate contamination at its source. Together we strive to keep U.S. cotton a viable commodity for both domestic and international markets.

