



**To the valued customers and stakeholders of the
AMS Cotton and Tobacco (C&T) Program:**



***The C&T Management Team, from left to right:
Ronald Robbins, Associate Deputy
Administrator (Operations); Darryl Earnest,
Deputy Administrator; Monica Alexander,
Associate Deputy Administrator
(Administration)***

Welcome to our second edition of the C&T external stakeholder newsletter. We will continue to publish these twice per year to provide updates on Program operations, activities, and noteworthy items. In this issue, we recap highlights and challenges from the 2020-21 season and share our expectations for 2021.

The 2020 Season

The 2020 season was among one of the most challenging we have experienced in recent history. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to change the way we do business, adapting our operations to comply with CDC guidelines and to protect employee health. We successfully implemented new protocols I

outlined in our previous stakeholder newsletter, including mandatory facial coverings, social distancing, modified workstation layouts, shift staggering, enhanced cleaning and sanitizing procedures, and strict visitor policies. C&T staff and our stakeholders are to be commended for adhering to these new policies and following our stricter guidelines.

Despite the growing numbers of positive cases across the country, C&T was able to keep infection numbers among our employees low and prevent any significant spread of the virus at any one location. As of January 24th, C&T had experienced 83 positive cases out of approximately 1,500 employees. These were all isolated cases with contact tracing showing exposure to the virus did not occur within C&T offices. This indicates that our internal protocols are effective. Unfortunately, C&T did experience one death attributed to COVID-19 during the season: Genevieve Gordon. Genevieve was of the longest tenured seasonal cotton classing supervisors in the Visalia, CA Classing Office. We continue to extend our deepest sympathies to her family, friends, and co-workers.

The 2020 cotton crop was much smaller than originally projected. As of January 28th, the Program had classed 13.3 million out of an expected 13.8 million bales of Upland cotton and 450,000 out of an expected 520,000 bales of Pima cotton. Our overall crop estimate stands at 14.3 million, down dramatically from our initial estimate made back in the summer. The impacts of multiple hurricanes and tropical weather events, drought conditions, and erratic temperatures took their toll on the crop.

Perhaps one of the most traumatic aspects of the 2020 cotton crop was the abundance of seed coat fragments in the territory serviced by our Macon, GA cotton classing office. This area, which includes all cotton-producing areas of Georgia and Florida and the southern half of Alabama, experienced historic levels of seed coat fragments. Over 40 percent of the almost 2.6 million bales classed by Macon have contained seed coat fragments. As you can imagine, we received many calls, inquiries, and visits by stakeholders about the seed coat fragment issue. In response, we analyzed classing data and reviewed our processes and procedures with stakeholders as they grappled with market discounts that accompany this type of extraneous matter.

What can we expect to see in 2021?

The new year included the inauguration of President Biden and his administration. Tom Vilsack was President Biden's selection to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. Vilsack is no stranger to the USDA, having served as Secretary during both terms of the Obama administration. We expect Vilsack's administration will bring new goals, objectives, and initiatives. For the U.S. cotton industry, we hope to see a larger crop with excellent quality and minimal effects on global demand from COVID-19. Within the Program, I am confident that our innovation and facility initiatives will continue to yield positive results.

As we embark on 2021, we do so with cautious optimism, a commitment to ensure the safety of our employees, and the dedication to deliver our stakeholders with the highest level of quality services. We continue to welcome any of our stakeholders who are interested in learning more about our Program and its cotton classing process to visit their area classing office or our Memphis, TN headquarters. However, as we continue to navigate through the challenges of COVID-19, we do ask anyone wishing to visit a facility to set up an appointment so that we can review the necessary COVID-19 protocol.

Thank you all for your continued business and trust in our Program and its services. We wish all of you the best of luck in 2021!