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Identity Preservation (IP) of Grain Crops

Some grain customers are willing to pay premium prices for grains that have special characteristics (for example, food-grade corn or soybeans, or organically produced crops), and in other cases, some customers are unwilling to accept grain that has certain traits (for example, genetically modified crops). In order to meet the demands of these customers, farmers and other grain handlers must be able to keep special crops separate and free from contamination by other crops, and prove that they have maintained separation (identity preservation, or IP). Here are some approaches and considerations that might be useful in an IP program.

Develop a customer-service attitude. Most farmers and other grain managers aren't used to practicing identity preservation and paying so much attention to the needs of specific customers. It's important to keep reminding yourself and your employees that identity preservation is critical for customer satisfaction and that premium prices could be at stake. Although auditing and testing are used in most programs to make sure that crop identity has been preserved, the fact is that honesty and trust are still important parts of most IP programs. Violation of that trust is likely to result in loss of customer confidence, premium prices, and future marketing opportunities.

Know what's in the contract! If you are producing a crop under contract, check the contract for information on identity preservation. Sometimes contracts actually specify steps that should be taken to preserve grain identity. Contracts might also state maximum levels of contamination allowed in the final product.

Develop an IP plan. For some crops, you are allowed to have a certain percentage of contamination in the final product. Small amounts of contamination at each step add up and can cause the final product to exceed tolerances. Draw a flowchart or at least list all of the steps involved in producing a crop from seed to final delivery and try to anticipate all of the points where contamination could occur. Then, develop a plan to minimize contamination at each crop production and handling step, record the plan, and document your actions to implement the plan.

Consider growing and storing IP crops in separate locations. If you own or rent farms that are some distance from one another, it would be much easier to maintain and prove crop separation if one of the farms were dedicated to production of the IP crop. This approach can also help reduce contamination due to pollen drift from other crops (unless your neighbors grow crops that cause contamination). Even if you don't have separate farms with separate grain handling systems, consider storing your IP crops in bins that are not tied into the

grain handling system that is used for your other crops. This reduces the chances for grain handling mistakes and makes it easier to document separation.

Keep detailed records. Use names or numbers to identify each field, grain bin, and grain hauling vehicle and consider placing signs or labels on each field, bin, or vehicle. Develop a record system that is complete, but is easy for you and your employees to use and for others (inspectors) to understand. Record planting dates, field location and size, seed identity, inputs used, harvest date, crop yield, bin number where crop is stored, date crop is delivered, and the name of the person who delivered the crop and a description of the vehicle used. Records will be useful to you in future years and they will also help convince inspectors that you did everything possible to preserve crop identity and purity.

Clean equipment between crops. Most farmers don't have the luxury of using separate sets of equipment for their IP crops, so they need to thoroughly clean planters, combines, trucks, dump pits, grain conveyors, dryers, and storage bins when they switch from one crop to another. Use self-cleaning equipment, or at least equipment that is easy to clean, to minimize the time and effort required for cleaning equipment.

Keep an eye on custom operations. If you hire someone else to harvest, haul, dry, clean, or do anything else with your grain, make sure that they understand the concepts and importance of identity preservation. Make sure that custom operators clean their equipment and that your grain is not contaminated with other farmers' grain. Record names, dates, amounts, and locations to document custom operations.

Keep samples. Consider taking samples of your seed, of the harvested crop, and of the delivered crop, attaching meaningful labels, and keeping the samples until you are sure that the final buyer is satisfied that the crop meets identity and quality standards.

Watch costs. Premium prices for identity preserved crops can be quite attractive, but there are costs involved in preserving the identity of crops. Make sure that the value of premiums exceeds IP costs (labor for cleaning equipment, time and systems for record keeping, inspection fees, employee training, any extra equipment that is needed, opportunity cost for empty space in partially filled bins, etc.) before you invest too much in production of identity preserved crops. Also, consider the risk of contamination for your crop and your marketing options if the crop doesn't meet the standards for your intended market. In many cases, you can sell crops that don't meet IP standards on the feed or commodity market, but that might not be possible for some varieties that have unusual characteristics.