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## ANSWERING COMPLAINTS

Charles C. Baskin <sup>1/</sup>

Every seedsman receives an occasional complaint. These complaints may or may not be justified. Occasionally even with the best quality control program, a lot of seed will "slip through" into the market that may result in a complaint.

The nature of complaints are many and varied: (1) not getting a stand because of poor quality seed, (2) seed contained weed seed, and (3) a mixture of varieties, are among the most common complaints; there are many others.

Complaints need to be settled to the satisfaction of both parties if at all possible. Naturally, you as a seedsman would like to settle with a minimum of time, effort and expense or at no expense at all.

There are so many different situations, from a seedsman's position, that it is impossible to even touch on many. A look at specific situations might be helpful.

Custom seed processing is an area that lends itself to complaints. If seed germination is poor or even if field performance is poor, the processor often gets the blame. "You ruined my seed" or "you mixed my seed" are sometimes heard from the customer. Some points for consideration are:

- (1) Always closely inspect the seed that you are asked to process. Look for weed seed, mechanical damage, varietal mixtures, etc.
- (2) Always check seed moisture content. Many farmers have no idea what effect seed moisture has on processing and subsequent storage. Low moisture seed as well as high moisture seed are often potential problems.
- (3) If possible, farmers' seed should be checked for germination before processing.
- (4) Take a file sample before processing and if possible after processing so if any controversy arises you have something to refer to.

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If you find anything that can cause problems such as weed seed that may be difficult to remove, a high incidence of mechanical damage, high or low seed moisture, inform the owner as to what the consequences might be. Have an understanding before processing and not a misunderstanding after processing.

Stand or emergence complaints are always difficult because of the many things which can affect a stand like application of fertilizer, herbicides, depth of planting, weather and numerous other things. Often there is no way to tell for sure what might have happened and at times the farmer may not know exactly what was done, particularly if he is depending on hired labor.

On complaints of this kind, if possible, you as a seedsman might involve a third party. Every year I will make a few visits with a seedsman or be asked to be present by a farmer on a crop stand complaint. Someone from your Crop Improvement Association or State Department of Agriculture might be available in such situations. In such a case the only alternative is to do as thorough a job of field inspection as possible. Look for areas where there might be an acceptable stand in the field, any differences that you might find would be helpful in making comparisons. If the farmer has any seed left, a sample can be checked. If you as a seedsman have a file sample of the particular lot in question, this can be a big help in solving the problem. This, of course, is not always possible. A "poor seed" complaint really becomes difficult when the crop is well into the growing season or is ready for harvest before such a complaint is registered.

Weed infestations in a field blamed on seed are not always easy but may be easier than stand problems. Look for patterns. Maybe the weed seed were brought in by a harvesting machine from another field or by a custom harvester. In this case patterns should be fairly easy to recognize. Overflows from streams or ditches can spread weed seed. I have seen cocklebur in a soybean field follow the waterline of a winter overflow.

Another thing to always look for when dealing with weed seed is the location and distribution of weeds. Weeds in the middles, clumps or groups of weeds are not likely to be from the current seed planting; single weeds in the drill or a very low frequency could well have come from the current planting. Look for the same weeds in field borders, along irrigation ditches, roadsides, and other fields. Often weeds are not noticed until they show up in the field.

Mixed varieties can and do happen, but this can also be the result of a misunderstanding. Take a field of soybeans planted from certified seed for example. In an actual case that I helped investigate, the farmer's complaint was mixed seed. The farmer, seed company representatives, county agent and I all gathered to look at the situation. Off types were present, but when plant counts were made, the number of off

type plants was well within the certification regulations. This came as a surprise to the seedsman as well as the farmer. The seedsman didn't know his own state regulations. Certification regulations do vary from one state to another.

Tolerances are something that I think most farmers and some seedsmen don't understand. Tolerances are very difficult to try to explain, particularly when a farmer or seedsman is already upset about a particular situation. If seed are labeled 80% for germination, a complaint is filed, and a sample is tested with actual germination of 75%, the farmer often doesn't understand why this is legitimate.

If a label reads zero weed seed and one or two weed seed are found, it's hard to explain that "zero" can mean as many as two weed seed per pound. When you make this explanation you are usually considered a "shyster" and this is your way out.

There are many other types of complaints. We could never cover them all and I think we should conclude by thinking about how to minimize complaints.

To me, the answer is a good quality control program. Begin with clean fields, follow with timely harvesting, handle seed like the living organisms they are. Don't exceed your capacity for production, storage, or processing. Take good representative samples, conduct adequate tests, keep good records and file samples.

This is one place where I believe vigor testing can be of great benefit to you as a seedsman. You can measure the potential performance of a seed lot. When you do this and find a weak lot of seed, discard it before cleaning, treating and bagging. Not only will you save money but you eliminate those "law suit" quality seed lots.