



Department of Justice

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Fleming County Magistrate Pleads Guilty to Crop Insurance Fraud and Tax Fraud

FRANKFORT, Ky. – Christopher G. Hickerson, a Fleming County Magistrate and tobacco farmer, pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court on Monday, before U.S. District Judge Gregory Van Tatenhove, to charges of conspiracy to commit crop insurance fraud and tax fraud.

According to his plea agreement, Hickerson admitted that from Crop Year 2009 to Crop Year 2016, he made material misrepresentations on his federal crop insurance paperwork, for the purpose of getting money from the federal government that he was not entitled to receive. He admitted that he produced more tobacco crop than he reported to his insurance company, hiding that tobacco by selling it in other people's names or simply not reporting it to his insurance adjuster.

In his plea agreement, Hickerson acknowledged that in Crop Year 2014, he accomplished this through an agreement, with Debra Muse and another individual identified as R.W., to obtain fake grade sheets and tobacco sales receipts from Clay's Tobacco Warehouse, which he could submit to his insurance adjuster. Hickerson admitted that the grade sheets – which showed that his tobacco was no-grade or low-grade – were for tobacco that either did not exist or did not belong to him. Hickerson further admitted to failing to report all of his tobacco sales on his tax returns in 2012, 2013, and 2015.

Hickerson is scheduled to be sentenced on April 29, 2020. He faces up to five years in prison on the conspiracy to commit crop insurance fraud conviction and three years in prison on the tax fraud conviction. He faces a \$250,000 fine on each charge. Before imposing a sentence, the Court will take into consideration the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and federal sentencing statutes.

Robert M. Duncan, Jr., United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky; Bethanne Dinkins, Acting Special Agent in Charge, United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General; James Robert Brown, Jr., Special Agent in Charge, Federal Bureau of Investigation; Bryant Jackson, Special Agent in Charge, Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation; Heather Manzano, Deputy Administrator for Compliance, United States Department of Agriculture-Risk Management Agency; and Willie Skeens, Director, Kentucky Department of Insurance Fraud Investigation Division, jointly announced the conviction. The United States was represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Erin Roth and Kathryn Anderson.

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