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WITHDRAWN
1972

Proceedings of
THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING CONFERENCE

Denver, Colorado

April 27-29, 1971

Sponsored by:

**Consumer and Marketing Service, USDA
USDA and State Extension Services
Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy
Foreign Agricultural Service, USDA
National Association of Marketing Officials
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
USDA and Cooperative USDA-State Research Service**

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FOREWARD

The sponsoring agencies and the Program Committee express their appreciation to the speakers; the individuals who served as Steering Committee--Discussion Leaders for the various work groups; the Secretary-Consultants; and to those individuals who served as Chairmen of the various sessions. The smooth functioning of the Conference was due to work of many groups and individuals but particularly to the Colorado Department of Agriculture, the Colorado Extension Service, and the Colorado Experiment Station.

Copies of these proceedings may be obtained from the Matching Fund Program Staff, Consumer and Marketing Service, USDA, Washington, D. C. 20250.

Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Plans for Workshop..... George H. Goldsborough	1
Responsibilities of Public Agencies to the Changing Food and Fiber Industry..... J. Phil Campbell ✓	3
Industrialization in AgricultureEric Thor ✓	13
Alternative Marketing Systems of the Future.....William E. Black ✓	26
Implications to Markets and Marketing of:	
1. New and Improved Natural and Synthetic Food and Fiber Products.....F. E. Horan ✓	31
2. Innovations in Agricultural Production and Harvesting.....LaVon Fife ✓	55
3. Innovations in Food Processing and Distribution.....Richard J. Jones ✓	62
4. Electronic Data Processing.....Charles French ✓	69
Summaries of Workgroup Discussions.....	78
Problems, Policies and Prospects for U. S. Foreign Trade.....Kenneth K. Krogh ✓	81
Export Prospects by Commodity	
1. Fats and Oils, Oilseed and Oil Cake.....Howard A. Akers ✓	90
2. Tobacco.....H. Reiter Webb ✓	92
3. Cotton.....H. Reiter Webb ✓	93
4. Poultry.....David R. Strobel ✓	94
5. Horticultural Commodities.....John W. Stewart ✓	95
6. Dairy Products.....Samuel L. Crockett ✓	97
7. Grains.....Richard E. Bell ✓	98
Ascertaining Consumer Preference and Market Potential for Selected Products.....Peter L. Henderson ✓	101
Foreign Market Techniques.....A. B. Brannock ✓	106
Transportation Developments and Their Implications to Foreign Trade.....Dale Anderson ✓	110
Summaries of Workgroup Discussions.....	115
F.T.C. Views of Consumer Concerns Regarding Food and the Food Industry.....Jeannette M. Lynch ✓	122
Regulating and Serving the Domestic Market.....Clayton Yeutter ✓	130
Summaries of Workgroup Discussions.....	137

	<u>Page</u>
Improving Environmental Quality.....Ned D. Bayley ✓	144
Environmental Problems and Approaches to their Solution at:	
1. The Production Level.....Andrew Varley ✓	150
2. The Processing Level.....David E. James ✓	157
3. The Consumer Level.....Joseph Havlicek ✓	161
List of Participants.....	169

REGULATING AND SERVING THE DOMESTIC MARKET

Dr. Clayton Yeutter
Administrator, Consumer and Marketing Service, USDA

Introduction

Today I'd like to concentrate on programs of the Consumer and Marketing Service which are of a marketing and regulatory nature and which have implications in the overall marketing process.

I'd like to talk about grading programs, market news, the marketing structure, and some of the ways in which government has contributed and might contribute to these programs in the future.

Grading Programs

The Consumer and Marketing Service has responsibility for nearly all of the agricultural grading programs in this country.

These programs are basically voluntary, although there are some exceptions.

Traditionally, producers, wholesalers and retailers have been directly served by grading programs because grades contribute to the movement of agricultural products. The consumer has been a peripheral beneficiary, at least to the extent he has learned what grades mean.

What we need to decide now is whether grades should be made more beneficial to consumers, and, if so, whether we can achieve that end under the present grading system.

If we cannot effectively serve both industry and the consumer with the present grading system, then how do we determine who is to be served, and to what extent? And there is also the question of who should pay for grading-- industry, the consumer, government, or some combination thereof.

Most housewives know the difference between Prime and Choice beef, but they may not have that much knowledge about the grades of other agricultural products. The consumer may be confused when we grade some products Prime, Choice, and Good; other products 1, 2, and 3; and still other products A, B, and C. So we must also decide just exactly what we can or cannot do as a practical matter to achieve the uniformity and consistency in terminology desired by consumers.

We in the Consumer and Marketing Service also provide a service that goes beyond grading. We have a voluntary service, paid for by supermarkets, in which we look at the sanitation of the products in supermarkets, check temperatures and shelf life, give consideration to the freshness of products, etc.

etc. Although I have not yet come to any personal conclusions, I wonder whether USDA should be involved in this type of program. It obviously does make a contribution to the protection of the consumer--helping to assure her of a wholesome product on the supermarket shelf--but this may not be an appropriate function of the Federal government. It might more appropriately be done by local governments or by private industry itself.

There is always a tendency for government programs to expand. So we must be on guard against this and take an unbiased look at any tendency toward the addition of peripheral services or responsibilities.

I do not, however, in any way discount the necessity for consumer protection, and I fully agree that one of the gaps in the consumer protection area is at the retail level. The question is how that gap is to be filled, and I'm not at all sure it ought to be filled by the Federal government.

Grading programs have gained tremendous respect in this country. I do not know of a government program that is more highly regarded. We've achieved a very high level of proficiency in such programs, and, since my arrival in Washington six months ago, the number of complaints on grading has been near zero. When one considers the thousands of people who are involved in grading, it's obvious these people must be doing a tremendous job.

Market News

Those of you who are not directly connected with government or agriculture might wonder what market news is. It is basically price reporting on agricultural products, but it often includes specific information on supply, demand, movement, etc.

We've had market news in this country for a long time. But with the changes that are taking place in both production and processing in the United States, we must consider where market news fits into the overall marketing picture in 1971. It has to fit in a way that's a lot different from 1961, or 1951, or 1941. Price information is even more essential today than it's been in the past. I do, however, feel that market news must be improved and expanded if it's going to meet the needs of 1971, 1975, and 1980.

For example, we have had tremendous innovations in communications technology in recent years and more changes occur every day. We need to do more to capture the benefits of these advances.

Also, we should not misjudge the ability of people in the agricultural industry today to assimilate large quantities of information. We have many sophisticated producers of livestock and other agricultural commodities in this country. They can and do read a lot, which suggests that they can be provided large volumes of information to use in whole or in part, as they see fit. Obviously, however, quantity of information should not be a substitute for quality.

Whether government should analyze information for a producer is an open question. Should we advise the livestock producer how many cattle he should

produce and when he should market them. Or, should we simply concentrate on providing him information with which he can make his own decisions?

It certainly is necessary that someone provide him with analytical information. Maybe that should be the role of private enterprise. Perhaps there is a dual role here--a complementary role--whereby government might more efficiently and effectively provide basic information but private enterprise might provide analytical information.

Some of our market news reports are performing a function for which they were not intended - price establishment. In some commodities, buyers and sellers alike are using yesterday's report as a base for negotiating today's price. This places market news in the incongruous role of being both a "price maker" and a "price reporter." It is a development which merits the attention of all of us. Some producer groups contend that the reports benefit buyers more than sellers in the negotiation process, and thus do a disservice to agriculture and should be abolished. But one must then ask where the producer (particularly the small producer) would then obtain his price information - and whether he would really benefit by elimination of a reporting service that is national in scope and highly respected for thoroughness and objectivity.

Marketing Structure

We often discuss the marketing structure in overly simplified terms. From the producer's standpoint, we talk about two things: (1) bargaining power through which the producer can raise his aspirations and, hopefully, gain results in the marketplace; (2) supply discipline, which can lead to the same result; or (3) some combination of the two.

There have been many innovations in these relationships through the years. Traditionally, the means of providing bargaining strength and supply discipline for agriculture has been through government programs. For a number of commodities we've had supply discipline through acreage allotment programs, and these have provided bargaining strength, in the broad sense, by taking excess production off the market at a minimum price. The government, in essence, has been serving as a bargaining mechanism between the farmer and the American consumer.

This is an oversimplification, but government has played a major role in our marketing structure. I certainly expect that this will continue. How long it will continue is speculative simply because we're moving more and more toward an urban-oriented Congress.

There are plenty of arguments that can be made on behalf of agricultural programs. Food is a better bargain today than it's ever been in this country and a better bargain in the United States than perhaps anywhere in the world.

But it is becoming increasingly difficult to articulate that viewpoint effectively in the political situation which exists today. Therefore, agriculture may have to search for other mechanisms for providing bargaining power or supply discipline.

Marketing Orders

For a number of commodities, marketing orders have worked with some degree of success, but they are not without limitations.

Marketing orders have worked best where production has been concentrated in a limited geographical area with a limited number of producers. They have at least served to bring a group of producers together to work on their common marketing problems, and in some instances have effectively provided bargaining power. However, they have not had great success in providing supply discipline. In general, marketing orders have not included production control provisions.

Many groups who are now using marketing orders, or who wish to have marketing orders for their commodities, are now seeking approval of production control or supply discipline mechanisms. This is a tough issue, if for no other reason than that one always runs the risk of creating windfall gains for the people who are in production at the time such controls are established. Those producers, of course, are delighted to have supply discipline incorporated into the system and accept the windfall gains because they will be of a one-time nature. Such gains obviously would be capitalized immediately into the overall program and would not accrue to any producers who come along at a later date.

The Department's position is that if this kind of provision is contemplated in a marketing order, there must be some reasonable right of entry for new producers. "Reasonable" entry is difficult to define. Obviously, existing producers will say, "If we apply supply discipline within our group and get prices to a level where we can make a decent profit, then other producers will wish to enter. If they can, in wholesale fashion, prices will decline, and all we've done is buy perhaps one year of profitable operations."

To balance opposing interests, it is necessary to have at least some entry, yet not so much entry or potential entry as to destroy the effectiveness of supply discipline. Parenthetically, I'm not sure whether the marketing order mechanism can be adapted to achieve effective supply discipline. The record to date is not especially encouraging.

Through the years, cooperatives have had varying success in achieving bargaining power. It has perhaps been easier to achieve when the cooperative has functioned within a marketing order than when the cooperative has operated on its own in the marketing process.

Dairy cooperatives have proved that a large commodity group with producers scattered throughout the United States can achieve significant bargaining power in the marketplace. They are strong in every sense of the word - in the political world as well as in the marketplace. Their success should serve as a hope and a stimulus for other agricultural producers. For if bargaining power can be achieved in dairying, it certainly is a possibility for nearly any other agricultural commodity group.

Cooperatives have had their share of difficulties, however. Management in small cooperatives has been a traditional problem. But the cooperative movement can provide bargaining power and supply discipline if the movement develops in an appropriate fashion and with top flight leadership.

In all of these movements toward bargaining power, a caveat should be added that anti-trust laws are always around the corner. So in any development of bargaining power, this must be kept in mind. Bargaining strength must be used in a responsible fashion if it's to be at all permanent.

Concentration

Concentration alone (including vertical integration) has had an impact on bargaining power. We've gone a long way towards concentration of agricultural production in this country--much further in some commodities than we have in others. For example, one particular commodity group arranges a conference telephone call at least once a week. During this call, the group discusses the national supply and price situation and where movements of the commodity can be made from long areas to short areas to level out the price pattern. This group has achieved very little supply discipline, but that may come in the future. With existing production, it has been able to smooth out valleys and peaks in the pricing structure and to avoid some of the extremes that have taken place in the past.

Corporations

Some have suggested that bargaining power will never come to agriculture until this basic industry is absorbed by giant corporations from the industrial world. I neither subscribe to this theory, nor believe that it will occur. In my judgment, the family farm of the future (which will be much larger than the family farm of today) will quite readily withstand corporate competition in American agriculture. In addition, with a little organization these family farms just might be able to display considerable bargaining strength. Farmers have traditionally been too independent to organize effectively, but don't bet your farm that this will always be the case.

Bargaining Associations

Bargaining associations may also offer some possibilities. Thus far their success has been limited because they have often been simply ignored by handlers. But this too could change with some assistance on the legislative front.

Marketing Guides

Marketing guides afford the possibility of doing what that conference call can do--permitting an industry to level out its supply and providing production guidelines for the coming year. We are now publishing guides for eggs, broilers, turkeys, and some fruits and vegetables. Marketing guides are an excellent device for government to assist informally in achieving market stability.

Marketing guides, of course, are valuable only if producers read and follow them. Agriculture could well use marketing guides for more commodities. In fact, we probably ought to be doing them for all commodities, but we'll not do so unless there is some expression of interest on the part of producer groups. Government should respond to requests from the people and not simply build programs for the joy of building.

Purchase Programs

We can provide some supply control through governmental purchase programs. There is no discipline involved here. In fact, when we purchase agricultural commodities on a surplus removal basis, this is some indication that supply discipline has faltered within that particular agricultural industry. (But not always; there is frequently a solid explanation for the supply problem.) It is likewise an indication that there is not a lot of bargaining power in the industry. Nevertheless, in an emergency, we can help an individual commodity group by purchasing for the school lunch and needy family programs under existing Federal law. We can't do a lot in this regard, because funds are limited, but we can help some. We'll probably be doing more in fiscal year 1972 than we have in the present fiscal year, but this program, too, may not continue forever.

We can also assist agricultural groups through our Plentiful Foods Program. We have had excellent success in this program with a very limited staff.

Other Possibilities

Other innovations are on the horizon. The Congress now has before it at least two major proposals which have a bargaining power orientation, and many others could readily be added. There are infinite possibilities for altering the market structure. But whether or not these possibilities are both practical and politically realistic is another question.

We in USDA will undoubtedly have some comments to offer on these and other proposals which may arise. We should do so, for representing agriculture is our most important function - within the constraints, of course, of our responsibilities to the general public.

USDA can serve as a catalyst in many instances among the different agricultural groups and within industries related to agriculture, such as the processing industries.

The Department can be a counsellor in some cases, too. With our headquarters in Washington, D. C., we're in a unique position of being able to feel the political pulse of the country as a whole and to have some concept of the urban relationships that are involved in agricultural production and with farm legislation.

We can serve as the administrator or supervisor of many programs that are only peripherally related to the Department, such as the research and promotion programs that are being approved under marketing orders. In almost all of these, USDA has some role in supervising distribution of funds and

reporting back to Congress. This puts an independent, unbiased entity into an overall surveillance role that's certainly important in any kind of program in which public funds are involved. And it protects the producer groups themselves, even when their own funds are involved.

Decentralization

In closing, I'd like to add a few remarks on decentralization. One of the most difficult tasks in government today is to decide where functions should be carried out -- at the Federal, State, or local level. Too often we as citizens have pushed them upstairs, and we've ended up with a gigantic composite of activities at the Federal level. Now we've begun to move some of them back down. It is appropriate that we do so, but it is a step that must be taken with care lest we lose national uniformity where national uniformity is essential. In addition, decentralization requires the development of an effective working relationship between the levels of government involved. This means that we cannot decentralize the Federal system overnight, and further means that proposals to decentralize government must be implemented on a priority basis.

In recent weeks we have received many decentralization proposals from State governments. Perhaps more have come to C&MS than to any other agency in the Department of Agriculture. Many, unfortunately, have been proposals that do not carry the greatest potential for decentralization. For some reason, we've had more with a low level of potential than with a high level of potential. I hope that we can cooperatively reverse that trend in the next few months.

These are just growing pains in the process of decentralizing. You'll find a warm welcome in my office for legitimate proposals of this nature.

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