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MARKETS ADVISORY SERVICE.

Under the heading of General Notes and News brief references have been made to a Markets Advisory Service recently set up by the Division of Marketing and Agricultural Economics with aims to improve the standard of fruit and vegetable packs consigned by producers to the Sydney Markets. For many years it has been realised that badly packaged and inferior quality produce not only has a general depressing effect upon the overall prices realised but also that producers suffer a considerable economic loss through ignorance, if not sometimes foolish hopes that somehow or other rubbish will be sold. In times of shortages such as were experienced during the war years, standards did deteriorate but nowadays keener competition leaves no room for the inferior article. All too often it has been found on investigation that glutting of a market with perishables has been, to a large extent, a banking-up of goods which are really unsaleable through immaturity, disease, coarseness or breakdown, traceable to faulty selection and worse packing. It is not safe to generalise, but years of experience indicate that choice quality produce is sold for satisfactory prices, even on the most overladen market.

Notwithstanding constant efforts made by the Department of Agriculture through its many channels and personal contacts between growers and field officers, it is an enormous undertaking to bring home to offending individuals in the great body of producers, of which there are probably 20,000 or more in New South Wales alone, urgent reminders and reasons for the poor returns which all too frequently they receive and are sometimes at a loss to understand. This is substantially the argument behind a Markets Advisory Service which is designed to give telegraphic advice within twenty-four hours of the receipt of faulty produce. The striking fact so far noted is that this telegraphic advisory service would appear to be serving the purpose for which it was introduced. Records maintained indicate that telegrams are seldom sent to the same producer twice. In a long term project of an educational nature such as this, it is as yet too early to draw final conclusions but a considerable mail has been received in which acknowledgment has been made of the real help provided.

To draw attention to this service, the Department readily accepted an opportunity recently provided by the Rural Bank to put a short talk over twenty-four country stations in New South Wales in the "Rural Magazine of the Air" session, on some aspects of the marketing of fruit and vegetables. The material was prepared in the Division of Marketing and Agricultural Economics and an edited precis of the talk is now reprinted, with the permission of the Rural Bank.

PROTECTING OUR PERISHABLES.

This is a reminder of a splendid marketing service, instituted by the Department of Agriculture. It is often said that a great deal of waste, and that means financial loss, would be stopped if only growers could see their produce opened up at the markets. It is tragic, sometimes, to see fruit and vegetables, the results of months of hard work, arrive in such a deplorable condition. Because of this, the Marketing Division of the Department of Agriculture started the Markets Advisory Service.

This service was inaugurated for the purpose of advising and assisting growers in the more efficient marketing of their products. We must agree that this is a very laudable aim, and one which should receive the co-operation of all producers. Before the service had been operating a full year, the Division had sent over eight hundred telegrams of advice to growers throughout the State—advice based on the evidence of what had been observed at the Markets. More than that, the Agricultural Departments in Queensland and Victoria have been notified about any produce from their States which has been withheld from sale by Inspectors of the Export and Import Branch of the Department. The Officer of the Division carrying out the duties in connection with this Service keeps a most interesting file of replies from growers to whom telegrams have been sent. Some of these letters are well worth reading, if only for the variety and ingenuity of reasons given for bad fruit or vegetables received at the market. That “other fellow” comes in for a lot of blame. It seems that, very often, the farmer himself was on holidays, and “someone else” picked the vegetables or sent the fruit, and so on and so on.

Here are a few brief extracts from the letters. “I knew the fruit wasn’t up to much, but I trusted to luck and hoped that it would colour up on the way down.” Ah me, how hope does spring eternal in the human breast. “It seemed a pity to waste fruit with a small black speck, but I will know better next time.” Well, that telegram brought the right type of response. “I knew the beans were inferior, but I hoped I’d be lucky enough to sell them.” Those “hoppers” again—I’m afraid they’re always with us. There is no denying the fact that the bad marketing of goods—and in this case, we are talking about fruit and vegetables, but the rule applies to all farm products—yes, the bad marketing of goods does really react both to the detriment of the grower and the consumer.

In the case of the grower, the goods may have to be reconditioned; that is, that the good quality will have to be separated from the “only fair,” and the latter displayed for sale at whatever price can be obtained. Worse than that, if the goods are condemned, they represent a total loss to the grower, and from the long term point of view, something very much more damaging—that is, an injury to his prestige. We don’t know whether it is generally known, but the topping of fruit or vegetables is illegal; it is a breach of the law and it carries the penalty of a fine.

Insofar as the consumer is concerned, it is obvious that if somebody should buy peas and then find that half the pods are unfilled, the price has been multiplied, so that, shall we say, a possible shilling a pound paid has really increased to two shillings a pound. There are some interesting figures of quantities of vegetables condemned at the City Markets for the last six months of 1945. Incidentally, it is understood that these figures have since risen. Thirteen tons of peas; twenty-three of beans; sixty of tomatoes; forty-eight of carrots; seventeen of parsnips; and sixty tons of cabbages—a gross total of two hundred and twenty-one tons of goods condemned, and one can imagine what a loss that meant to the growers. It is a fact that the grower who sends in badly graded or poor quality produce suffers a loss, but it does not stop with him. The presence on the market of defective packs has a tendency to bring down prices generally.

Well, that's the adverse side of the picture; there is a better one. Many growers build up a reputation for themselves, by supplying quality goods, which are uniformly and attractively packed, and they reap their reward in cash. Their produce usually creates an immediate demand, and a premium on the ordinary market rates.

Here is a short success story which starts badly: A Departmental Inspector launched a prosecution against a grower for breaking the Tomato Grading Regulations. The grower was fined fifteen pounds. Later on, this grower told the Inspector that he had actually befriended him by taking action against him, because since that time, he had paid particular attention to grading and packing. He had soon more than made up the amount of the fine in increased returns, and he said that his agent told him that his consignments now hardly "hit the stand" before they are sold. A well-known and successful fruit-grower has a large sign in his packing house which reads: "If in doubt, throw out." This is only another way of saying that grading is essential before packing, so that any losses from wastage or inferior quality shall be reduced to a minimum.

Lastly on "Protecting our Perishables," if the goods have been picked at the right time and graded properly, surely it is only the barest common sense to send them to market in a properly constructed and sufficiently strong container. They have to withstand considerable rough handling on the way, and the best of produce, if it is not adequately protected en route, can reach the market in such a condition that it can receive only one fate—to be condemned.

"Protecting our Perishables" is a very large subject with many different avenues worth exploration. At a later date, we hope to go into more detail with regard to individual products, but the basic rules apply to all forms—animal or vegetable—of farm produce.