

Turning Point

THE FERTILIZER SITUATION appears to be at a turning point. Several factors are involved. The largest at the moment, perhaps, is the downward trend in farm income. Another important factor which we believe will be of relatively short duration is the excess of supply over demand in certain areas.

There are favorable factors as well. There appears to be a trend for fertilizer purchases to be less exactly tied to farm income of the previous year (page 477). From several sources we hear expressions of firm conviction that if the farmer must reduce his expenditures during the coming year he will cut many other items before he cuts fertilizer. There is another favorable factor which continues to exist in the great amount of evidence that for the most part farmers in this country could apply larger amounts of fertilizer with an increased profit (not merely increased yields) per acre. Several examinations of the long term outlook in the world fertilizer picture have led to the conclusion that there will be an increasing excess of demand over supply in the next several years.

The factors discussed above are all big and important influences on the future of fertilizers. The field editors of AG AND FOOD recently completed a survey which is presented as a part of the feature of this issue (page 482). This has been developed by direct contact with a great number of the best informed people on various aspects of fertilizer production and use throughout the United States. It gives a clear indication of some current activities and thinking as well as some future outlook. Some tendencies such as price cutting and variations of consignment selling are becoming apparent. They will need close and constant attention during the next year or two to avoid troubles in what is and should continue to be a sound and progressive industry. Those tendencies are arising from a great blossoming in the industry, part of which might be stimulated by the rapid and almost simultaneous rise of several promising new forms of fertilizer.

The agricultural chemicals industry has had some difficult years partly as a result of poor business practices. Those practices were related to zealous rushing into what appeared to be a limitless bonanza, without sufficient study, then trying to find short cuts out of a difficult business situation.

The fertilizer industry certainly is undergoing a technical revolution. Furthermore it is being entered by some companies that have not previously been engaged in the sale of fertilizer materials. But the predominating influence is that of companies that know their business in technical manufacture and the marketing of basic technical products as well as the selling of fertilizers. Let us hope that tough competition or temporary excess of supply in the immediate future will not cause a stampede to practices causing harm for years to come.



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Food Additives Legislation

FOOD ADDITIVES BILLS now being prepared for Congress are based on one or the other of two varying philosophies: injunctive or licensing (see page 466).

At one extreme there is an inclination to give the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare licensing powers. The other approach gives that office enforcement power on an injunctive basis, with the Food and Drug Administration in the role of policeman.

As regulations stand today, the FDA has the function of policing of foods on the market, but not of licensing. By testimony of FDA the level of integrity and conscientiousness of the food industry has been very high.

We must give serious consideration to the fact that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is not financed, staffed, or equipped to test adequately in its own laboratories all of the food additives that may be proposed. It is recognized that the Government must be ultra-conservative in decisions related to public health and nutrition. Chief administrators and cabinet are political appointees. It is natural to expect a reluctance to approve new materials, even where there seems to be promise of improving the public diet. An unfavorable decision is easier than the risk of even a remote possibility of health damage. Such cases can be, and have been, used as political weapons. Such battles could allow inferences unfavorable to scientific research and industry, even where no satisfactory or concrete evidence is produced.

On the other hand, in the application of the injunctive approach, action by the government agency is prescribed only where evidence exists that a product is not safe. An active rather than a passive approach is called for. Failure to act, or blunders through excessive zeal can bring public reaction, but a sound and careful approach with satisfactory evidence can bring public approval.

The conclusion then is that the injunctive approach encourages research and furthers improvements in our nutrition while maintaining a safeguard over the public health. On the other hand, without reflection on the integrity of public officials, there is reason to believe that licensing powers on the part of a government agency coupled with a naturally ultra-conservative attitude may discourage research and the expenditure of funds and efforts in the search for better food.