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Have We a Bear by the Tail?

WITHIN RECENT MONTHS, an interesting new development has attracted the attention of many in the fertilizer industry. In particular, it has caused the basic producers of ammonium nitrate to sit up and take notice. This development is the use of fertilizer ammonium nitrate as an explosive. A number of reports have indicated that the fertilizer grade material can effectively replace explosive grade nitrate in some applications, and can do so at something like one half the cost of the explosive it replaces.

This sounds like a new market—and hence good news—for the fertilizer industry. Since the new practice seems to be catching on quickly, and the market potential represented is sizable, the news would seem especially good.

Nearly everyone will agree that progress is desirable, whether in the laboratory, the field, or the market place. And the development of new or enlarged outlets for fertilizer materials surely has the earmarks of progress. But a word of caution may be in order.

First let it be emphasized that fertilizer ammonium nitrate as such is a safe material when handled and used under normal conditions. To be used as an explosive, it must be mixed with oil, and set off by dynamite. By itself it presents no hazard, and when diluted with other materials—as in mixed goods—it would doubtless defy all efforts to induce an explosion. Hence, no question of safety in the ordinary handling of fertilizers is involved.

Indeed, we find no fault with the use of fertilizer grade nitrate as an explosive, if it will do a job more efficiently or more economically than some other material. But it has been brought to our attention that nitrate for this purpose is being sold in fertilizer bags, with fertilizer labeling still intact. This is the point on which a word of warning is indicated. Apparently some producers whose ammonium nitrate is being used in this fashion have made no effort to prevent the material from being identified as an explosive. Some, in fact, have even publicized the interchangeability of their materials with explosives, emphasizing the point with photographs of bagged, labeled ammonium nitrate fertilizer in use for blasting.

This strikes us as a short-sighted approach, and one that may cost a good deal more in public relations than it gains in publicity. For one thing, fertilizer materials—shipped as fertilizer, in fertilizer bags—enjoy preferential freight and insurance rates that are a decided benefit to the plant food industry. Those preferential rates are likely to suffer from “agonizing reappraisal” if the materials to which they apply are obviously being shipped for other purposes.

In addition, and of potentially greater seriousness, there is a distinct possibility that publicity of this kind could lead to regulatory action detrimental to the fertilizer industry's interests. Municipal officials who suddenly become aware that bagged fertilizer may be used as an explosive could hardly be expected to remain disinterested.

Particularly in the smaller cities and towns, which seldom include scientists on their official staffs, it would be too much to expect local governments to understand, or seek to understand, the scientific considerations involved. It is easily conceivable that in such circumstances not only ammonium nitrate, but also mixed fertilizers containing ammonium nitrate, might be classed as explosives, and made subject to all the regulations on handling, transport, and storage to which standard explosives are subject.

There are a good many people around who remember that ammonium nitrate was involved in the Texas City disaster. Unnecessary or ill-conceived publicity for a legitimate and effective use of fertilizer grade nitrate could, through distortion by over-active imaginations, lead to unnecessary and costly regulations.

Either an increase in freight rates or the imposition of unwarranted regulations would saddle the plant food industry with a burden it is in no condition to carry. Either would be too high a price to pay for the additional business at stake. Fortunately, however, it is not necessary to pay such a price; the industry is in the happy position of being able to have its cake and eat it, too. Fertilizer grade ammonium nitrate can be sold as an adjunct to explosives, if such sale is practical and profitable—but by all means it should be *taken out of the fertilizer bag*.