SUGGESTIONS FOR AN IMPROVED ADVISORY SERVICE ON FLORIDA VEGETABLES AND SOME BENEFITS WHICH SHOULD BE DERIVED FROM THEM

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It is from such groups as this that some of the most worthwhile developments and movements in our Nation's agriculture have started. If I recall correctly, the actual beginning of crop reporting started from just such a society in Maryland, even before there was a Department of Agriculture. The first actual crop reporting by the Government was started in the Patent Office in 1839.

If I can bring you any message or thought that will be helpful to the vegetable industry, I am more than glad to do it. I doubt if I can tell you anything new, but perhaps together we can reappraise some of the things we already know in such a way that we might help to improve the quality and effectiveness of the advice relating to marketing now being given to the vegetable industry.

As I have just mentioned to you, farmers long ago recognized the need for facts to guide them in the planting and marketing of their crops. If they needed help over a hundred years ago, there are many more reasons why they need help today although there are many who do not realize the need for it. As a result of many years of patient research in the laboratory and test plot, Florida vegetable farmers during the recent war years were able to increase their production in a ten-year period more than seventy-five percent. While this increase in the ability of farmers to produce was a godsend during the war, it can and is, creating serious problems now. The return per acre for Florida vegetables is in a downward trend. The 1950-53 average of gross returns per acre, deflated by the index of prices paid (for commodities, taxes, interest, and wages) was down about one-fifth from the relatively good returns of 1949. This decline even represents returns, on a like basis, slightly below the prewar years of 1939-41.

It is the feeling among most informed members of the vegetable industry that the only permanent and satisfactory solution of the problem of vegetable marketing is in the further development and improvement of the marketing and distribution system. I go further than this: Better marketing and distribution starts with intelligent planning before planting time, religious observance of a carefully worked out planting schedule, adequate pre-season arrangements for normal market outlets, programs for maintaining and stimulating consumption, and devices for controlling or disposing of surpluses should they arise. These are "musts" in any successful operation.

The primary objective of any Government Service should be to assist, in any capacity, where the job cannot be adequately handled on a private basis for the greatest common good. It is along the line of collecting and disseminating facts that the Government can render its greatest service. The factual information is of no value if it isn't used. I don't mean to be stepping on anyone's toes when I say that the information available has not been used to its fullest extent. The blame can be placed equally on those responsible for the preparation and distribution of it and on those for whose use it is intended. Since the information is designed for use by growers and shippers, it should be analyzed periodically by these groups to see if it is serving their needs.

We usually think of farming as being the most independent of all ways of life. But just how much independence does the average vegetable farmer really have in this complex and highly specialized economy which we have today? Many farmers have given up or turned over to someone else a good portion of the many functions which he once exercised. In so doing, he has, in a measure, lost the feel of things. Perhaps things have become so complicated that he has given up and reconciled himself to just being a producer. This is not as it should be. No one expects him to be a "jack of all trades" but it is, in a sense,
his duty and obligation to keep himself informed to the best of his ability on all of the factors which affect his business. After all, he is the key man in the whole picture, and it is an unhealthy situation for him to be forced into such a high state of dependency, either voluntarily or by circumstances. It is most unfortunate that his freedom in determining his course of action both as to planting and marketing is so often influenced by factors beyond his control.

I am concerned with the selfish attitudes, erroneous ideas, and fallacious thinking which are still present to some degree in the vegetable industry. We still have with us those who think that they can profit by deception. Temporarily they may, but not for the long pull. We have those who prefer to bury their heads in the sand rather than to face the facts. We have those who kid themselves by thinking that outsmarting the other fellow is good business, when actually it is repeat business that pays off. We have those who think withholding information is a virtue. If you are in a war, this is proper, but a healthy exchange of information is necessary for good business. Let's leave Iron Curtain tactics for the Reds. Of course, we always have the perennial subscriber to the short crop and scarcity theory. This theory is all right for playing games, but not for sound merchandising. Most everyone, at times has visions of some day enjoying a monopoly, but in this democratic country the public has very little patience with this sort of thinking.

Times are changing and thinking is changing with them. The millennium has not yet been reached but we are making progress. People are realizing more and more that you have to give the other fellow credit for having an equal amount of intelligence. Modern merchandising of vegetables has been largely responsible for some of these changes in attitudes. Growers and shippers are learning that the display type of merchandising with the many options of choice means that competition is always keen with the public being the judge and quality usually the winner. The proof of the pudding is still in the eating. If the product isn't good and the price reasonable in relation to that of the other products, it just doesn't sell.

Now what does all this have to do with an improved advisory service to vegetable growers? Simply this: We are proud of our vegetable industry in Florida. We are proud of the individuals who make it up. We want to see them successfully pass through the periods of adjustments ahead and go on to an even more brilliant future. Their chances of successfully accomplishing these things will be greatly enhanced by a real honest to goodness advisory service, which leaves no stone unturned to keep them accurately informed at all times. A man's judgment is never any better than the facts on which he bases them. If vegetable growers are going to hold their own and improve their lot, they have got to start dealing in more facts and less fancy.

There is a wealth of information available from the U. S. Department of Agriculture covering practically every phase of the production and marketing of vegetables. We have trade papers which give special treatment to special subjects, and a wealth of news stories. Yet there still seems to be a void which has not been filled. Much money is spent in getting information, but there is a definite weakness in getting economic information across to those who need it. As a rule, growers readily accept information on production methods but show little interest about marketing and distribution information beyond the prices being received at shipping points. This is understandable, but his interest should not stop here if he is to intelligently participate in planned marketing programs and further the growth of his industry.

Many, many times have I been asked such questions as, “What can I plant to make some money? What's the situation in Texas? How can we compete with these larger operators?” Each man grasping for some fact to guide him in his effort to make a living. It is an unusual man with plenty of time on his hands who can compile his own information and make his own interpretations. It so happens that there are very few farmers or members of the industry who are able or inclined to do this.

My first suggestion would be that a complete handbook be prepared for each vegetable crop grown. This handbook should contain basic production data, timing in relation to competing areas, shipments and distribution, utilization, and prices. It should contain costs of transportation, handling, and production. Complete with pictures and charts—a veritable encyclopedia. The only way to ap-
praise the future is to have a sound knowledge of the past.

After these handbooks are available, it would seem that a specialist in marketing should be assigned for intensive group study of the crops in which these groups are interested. Through such study groups, growers should be able to determine what their advantages and disadvantages are. They may find that they are not strategically located for certain crops, or even any vegetable crop. On the other hand, they may find that they can profitably expand their operations. I honestly believe that these study groups would be well received.

In Florida, an outlook report is prepared each summer prior to the fall planting season. This is an excellent service, and one in which I am keenly interested. I think it is of great value and growers are beginning to appreciate it more. This report can be much improved in its preparation and presentation. The old axiom of an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure is still true. Vegetable growers are no different from anyone else; they want to know what the Big Picture is likely to be, just as you and I. Without outlook information of this kind, there can be no intelligent planning. If there is anything worse than operating in the dark or by hunches I don't know what it is. In this category lies one of the biggest fields for education.

At the present time only a few vegetable crops are covered by "intentions to plant" reports. I believe this service should be broadened to cover more crops. The purpose of "intentions to plant" is to acquaint growers with what other growers are thinking of doing. It gives them an opportunity to change their minds if things don't look too good.

In our crop reporting work we are hoping to get started this year, in an experimental way, on a new report which will give plantings by periods. One of the greatest troubles in the vegetable growing business is serious overlapping of harvest periods by competitive producing areas. Having several areas in heavy production at once apparently has a weakening influence on f.o.b. markets. The mere fact that several areas are in production at one time gives wide play to the imagination, unless the actual facts as to existing conditions are available to all concerned. It is hoped that a report of this kind will also be able to reduce the rumors which cause growers in a given section to start planting sooner than they should or continue to plant longer than they should. It should also help them to smooth out their plantings in their own area. Spasmodic planting and doubling up always create marketing problems. This type of report appears to me to be indispensable in the carrying out of any state-wide or national marketing program. It should also enable those concerned with marketing to anticipate surpluses and make some provision for disposing of them before they occur.

I think it would be a wonderful improvement if several of the reports now available could be combined into a more comprehensive report. It is easier said than done, but I feel strongly that something should be done in this direction.

In presenting these remarks to you I have given you a very general discussion of the need for better reports of an economic nature, what is being done, and what might be done. This is only one person's opinion, and should be considered as such. I would like to see this organization become as active in marketing problems, and marketing research, as it has in production problems and production research. I think it would be an excellent thing if you as an organization would arrange to make a study of the needs for an improved advisory service to vegetable growers, review the services now being rendered, and make such recommendations as you deem advisable. I am confident that such recommendations will be well received by all concerned. It has been said that the greatest thing in life is the power to grow. If the Florida vegetable industry is to continue in a healthy growth, intensive and intelligent planning is necessary and an up to date advisory service is essential to sound planning and development.