

CROP REPORTING

by
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I did a lot of stomping around in my family room this last Sunday trying to think of some clever opening for this presentation. As you know, I'm a newcomer to this State and in an attempt to get acquainted I've attended a good many meetings.

I'm usually out there where you are and I know what my reaction would be if the program listed a talk on statistics to be given by a "Statistician" at 4:00 in the afternoon. The only thing I could think of that would move me from the audience to the closest bar sooner would be a Statistician trying to be clever.

Lets face it, except for those that describe the female form, statistics are pretty dull and statisticians can do damn little to make them entertaining.

But we're here to talk about potato statistics. Not just any old potato numbers, but a program of reports that over the years has generated a good deal of heat and emotion.

This afternoon I feel like my career with the Crop Reporting Service has come full circle. My first assignment after joining our California Office in the mid 1950's was the potato program. There were sly smiles and chuckles on the faces of my older more experienced fellow workers when my assignment became know. They were all happy that the "new guy" had got stuck with that miserable bunch of potato growers. Seems they always had some kind of gripe. They were always writing nasty letters to the boss. "Make a mistake and you sure will hear about it." "Some of those ingrates even write their Congressmen or the Governor."

Well, some of those guys are still working at the same job for the same pay. They never seemed to learn that when you don't hear from the people you serve, it more than likely means that nobody out there cares.

I learned to never equate silence with success. When there is no criticism of what you're doing, you're in trouble. Nothing is more deadly than indifference or apathy and the potato industry has never been guilty of these traits.

The potato business is competitive, market sensitive, and highly consumer-dominated. Our reports are used and do have an effect. Later we will try to discuss some of these effects because that's where it's really at, but first I would like to trace some evolution in the program and bring you up-to-date on current developments.

Going back again to the early 50's and my first job, we find the program entering what was a revolutionary change. For decades we had released forecasts and estimates of production for two potato crops, early and late. The industry was not being properly served. There was not enough detail. Meetings were held and a new plan was introduced.

It was decided that if we issued estimates based on six seasonal groups, things would be better. So we came up with the now familiar set of name tags. We called them winter, early spring, late spring, early summer, late summer and fall. At the outset there was considerable confusion. For the first few months, nobody was quite sure what we were estimating. The adjustment was made, however, and for nearly 20 years, this breakdown was used.

There was always that feeling that perhaps we were over-zealous in trying to meet a need for more detail. To be honest, there were few in the trade that ever fully comprehended six crops

of potatoes a year. Most learned to understand where their particular operation fit into the pattern, but they were never really able to easily evaluate the total supply situation.

We again met with all segments of the industry and sought their advice and guidance. The result is a new schedule of releases based on a restructured seasonal breakdown. There are now four seasonal groups, winter, spring, summer and fall. A friend of mine commented that this was a typical statistician's solution to the problem. He accused us of adding the two seasons of the earlier program to the six seasons of the most recent program and dividing this by the number of programs to arrive at an average of four.

This new schedule is being implemented this year and we have every reason to believe that it will prove to be a better program.

Turning to the potato stocks reports, we find some additional changes. Here there has been more consistency of direction in the evolution of this part of the program. Twenty years ago, there was one stocks report issued in January. During the fifties, three additional monthly reports were included and this year a fifth report will be added. We now will release reports on stocks each month from December through April.

Some other important changes have been taking place. These are in the area of collecting our basic data. You are all familiar with the mailed inquiry. Many of you receive a questionnaire from my office nearly every month. Some of you with diversified operations may get several. Although it may not seem that way to you, we do try to manage our lists and not hit the same respondent too frequently. However, the nature of our shifting production units has led to our reliance of fewer and fewer larger operators for our information.

These mail surveys still are the primary source of our data, but we are adopting more sophisticated sample survey techniques. These will lead to improved accuracy and less reliance on these subjective grower appraisals. For potatoes, as we have for many other commodities, we are turning to probability samples designed and selected to properly represent the universe. These may take the form of units of land or they may be a sample of operators. In the case of potatoes, we are using both a sample of defined areas of land and a probability list sample of grower to develop our estimates. This technique goes by the name of Multiple-frame sampling. It is an efficient method of collecting reliable statistical indicators for which measures of sampling error can be made.

Your part in this type of operation becomes even more critical. Your cooperation in the mail approach was certainly important, but in this new method it is essential. The system requires that measures for all elements in the sample be acquired. A refusal to cooperate when your farm is selected becomes more than just a frustration.

We could talk for some time on the merits of these new approaches to data collection, but I would like to get you involved in the discussion of program merits mentioned earlier.

There is one very admirable characteristic about the Statistical Reporting Service which I have tried to point out in my talk today. This is that we are constantly reviewing our own program. We not only seek out our users evaluation, but we attempt to act on their suggestions within the limits of our resources.

Change very often originates at meetings like this and I invite you to ask any questions you might have. I also invite a discussion of program value. Do these reports hurt the grower? Are they misleading? Do they put an unfair tool in the hands of the buyer? Would you all be better off with no reports at all?

These and many similar questions come to my mail box every week. Perhaps we can kick some of these thoughts around together.