

POTATO STATISTICS, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

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It was nearly thirty years ago that I experienced my first hostility, my first negative reactions, my first refusal. I was in Tulelake, sloshing around in unfamiliar snow, trying to gather data for the January potato stocks report. I remember sitting in a tub of hot bath water that night trying to sort out the events of the day; trying to understand my failure and their attitude. I was troubled. Driving home the next day, I rationalized that perhaps living and farming in Tulelake was what made them act the way they did.

In those days we estimated two potato crops, early and late. We had one stocks report, January. There were a few starch plants around that took the culls but the market was fresh and all domestic. Over the years we have been very receptive to program changes. We have expanded here and contracted there. We have added new reports and discontinued old reports. No single commodity program has received more attention, more careful consideration than potatoes.

When it comes to potato estimates, we really try hard to please. Why then with all the change, all the accommodation, does producer opposition remain strong? What is it about a potato acreage report or a production forecast or a stocks report that can generate such intense negative emotion?

Sure, we periodically have some rough times with other commodity groups. Sometimes we have it coming, but often it's been a reaction to some unrelated event such as an embargo. No other large segment of agriculture has so consistently sustained such widespread opposition to crop reports.

Why? My old Tulelake excuse won't hold water. There has to be another explanation. One nearly consistent characteristic stands out. Over-production, depressed markets and prices at or below the cost of production.

You're out of step this year. I had a fresh handler call my office to see what our December report showed. He was complaining that you, the producers, were using our reports to beat him over the head. You were giving him the shaft. Now, that's a new twist.

A long history says that today's circumstances won't last. History teaches that in spite of the best efforts of your industry leadership, you will turn it around, overplant, overproduce and put yourselves through the same old wringer again.

You could watch for early indications of trend provided by our reports. You could pay particular attention to reports relating to the spring crop in California. It may be a very prudent thing to do if you have your eye on early Norgolds and the fresh market. Unfortunately, you no longer have the intentions reports to use.

You know, I wasn't just talking when I said that we try hard to please. We meet quite frequently with a committee of the National Potato Council. We hold regular user conferences across the Nation. We give careful consideration to each problem, each suggestion. We have, as a direct result, made a number of changes. Some of the major actions were discontinuing the April Intentions Report, delaying the first forecast of production until October, dropping the November forecast, increasing the number of monthly stocks reports. We also simplified our seasonal definitions and started to report stocks by type of potato.

To improve our performance and insure increased accuracy, the major Fall crop states now base both acreage and production forecasts on improved sampling and data collection techniques. Here in the Northwest, we have developed a formal data exchange and analysis procedure for each potato stocks report. We have gone the limit in our effort to improve and to be responsive to your industry needs.

Our efforts need to be matched by your understanding and by your support and cooperation. If we are to accomplish our mission, we must reverse the growing incidence of producer refusals.

Frankly, we in the field find ourselves in an uncomfortable dilemma. We are asked to carry out a program of estimates that, we're told, reflects both the needs and the expressed desires of the producers. Yet, we're frequently met with hostility and all too often are denied the information we seek.

Don't blame the reports for your troubles. Don't challenge their accuracy without some rational reason. The record shows they are accurate. You won't stop a report by refusing to cooperate. You will only increase the chance for inaccuracy or error.

Do take a position. Make your attitudes and wishes known to your leadership. You can make a difference; you will be heeded.

Now before you all jump up and call for this to stop or that to stop, think about it. Listen to others, consider the consequences. Base your decisions on calm, rational analysis. Don't be stamped into a situation you may later regret.

Personally, I feel you may some day come to regret the loss of the intentions report. Critics created an emotional, negative reaction to the reports that were clearly not justified by the facts. Use care in making your decisions. This is a very good time to get something stopped. Getting something started will be quite another matter.

One parting word of caution. The "do it yourself" movement has been cropping up in the estimates business. They don't work. You won't find anymore cooperation than we do; perhaps less. On top of that, you will find that no one will pay much attention to the results.

They do pay attention to ours. If you could be in my office on the day of a major release and listen in on the number of calls we get, you might have a different attitude.

You need the fresh shipper and processor. They, in turn, need you. You both need consumers. Regardless of who uses it, you all need accurate, timely information if this inter-relationship is going to work to your mutual advantage.