

THE VALUE OF GOVERNMENT CROP REPORTS

By A. G. WILSON

Early History of Crop Reporting—What the U. S. Is Doing—How the Reports Are Made Up—Value to Farmers.



A good combination, heifers and a good start of alfalfa.

ATTEMPTS to gather agricultural statistics have been undertaken by various nations since ancient times. Most agricultural statistics gathered in olden times, however, were more in the nature of enumerations than current information concerning growing crops. Early Romans attempted to gather statistics. Charlemagne tried unsuccessfully during the Middle Ages. Attempts were made in Lombardy toward the close of the 17th century. In 1806 the National Convention of France issued decrees requiring a register of crops. This lasted until 1852.

The first fund authorized by the U. S. Congress for the collection of agricultural statistics was made in 1839. From 1839 until 1862 such statistics as were gathered were handled by a small force in the Patent Office. These statistics were of a more or less fragmentary character, however, and failed to give any clear and complete picture of agricultural production in intercensal years.

In 1855 a Mr. Earle, President of the Maryland Agricultural Society, made an effort to start a system of crop reports, by sending circulars to

individuals and County Societies. Attempts made by Mr. Earle were not very successful, as only a few of the Societies replied to his letters. These efforts assumed more definite plan, when in 1862, a Mr. Judd, editor of *The American Agriculturist*, sent a circular to his subscribers and others, containing five sets of inquiries, one for each month from May to September. He published the results of these inquiries. The efforts of Mr. Earle and Mr. Judd, which preceded the establishment of regular Government crop reporting service, were apparently the first systematic efforts to obtain speedy reports on crop conditions.

The present system of crop reporting apparently resulted from a growing demand on the part of farmers for current information prior to marketing time as to condition of crops.

The Department of Agriculture was organized in 1862. All statistical work relating to agriculture was transferred from the Patent Office to the Department of Agriculture. Under the direction of a Statistician the Department started a system of monthly reports beginning in May, 1863. This system was not based

upon direct estimates of production per acre, but by a comparison with census yields. This system had great possibilities for error.

Present day crop reports include many items, one of the most important of which is the annual report by States and the United States of acreages planted to different crops, estimates of the condition of growing crops as a percentage of normal, forecasts of yields per acre and total prospective production during growing season, yields per acre, and total production at or near harvest time. There are many other items which I will not mention here.

The work is now carried on by what is known as the Division of Crop and Livestock Estimates, a part of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the Department of Agriculture. Its personnel in Washington consists of a Statistician in charge, a staff of eight or ten experienced statisticians, and a corps of statistical clerks. In the field the force consists of a Agricultural Statistician in each State, or group of States. These men are in the classified civil service. Each Agricultural Statistician enlists the voluntary services of



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from 250 to 300 selected crop correspondents, designated as "aids," who report to him every month regarding the crops grown in the State. At close of each month he makes a detailed estimate of the crops in his State and forwards it to Washington, with full explanatory notes. In addition to salaried Agricultural Statisticians and crop specialists, this work has the cooperation of over 300,000 voluntary crop reporters who serve without compensation. The principal classes of reporters are:

1. Township reporters, comprising one farmer reporter for each agricultural township in the United States. Of these there are slightly less than thirty thousand.

2. County reporters, one for each agricultural county in the United States. There are about 2,300 County reporters.

3. Field Aids, of whom there are more than thirty thousand, are voluntary reporters who report agricultural conditions within their observations and knowledge.

4. Special Price reporters, of whom there are about eighteen thousand. The majority of these are local merchants and dealers.

5. Livestock reporters, about thirty thousand in number.

6. Individual farm reporters, numbering in excess of seventy thousand, report only for their own farms.

The above list is by no means complete. In addition to the foregoing there are several thousand crop reporters who report on special crops, such as cotton, tobacco, rice, etc.

Starting on the first of October the Government issues a "Condition and Yield" report on the cotton crop. These reports are issued every two weeks until the 15th of November. On the 1st of December the "Final Crop Estimate" is issued. There are three other reports issued concerning cotton: "Ginning Reports," "Consump-

tion Reports," and "Acreage Reports."

The reports of the Government have been very severely criticized, and objections have been numerous. The principal objections are: (1) That they are guesses, (2) That they are high, and (3) That they keep the speculator informed to the detriment of the farmers.

Considering the first objection. One makes the statement that the reports are guesses cannot be acquainted with the facts. In reality the reports are carefully prepared estimates, based upon adequate and comprehensive information obtained from those most conversant with the actual situation. Mention has been made of some seventy thousand individual farm reporters who report for their own farms. These farmers report the actual acreages that they have planted in various crops. This fact alone insures a great degree of accuracy to the Government estimates. Ninety per cent of the correspondents are actual farmers. The reports are compiled and the resulting estimate prepared by trained and experienced statisticians.

It has been found by experience that crop reporters do not tend to be too optimistic concerning crop reports and yields. In the case of cash crops, assumed personal interest is likely to make reporters unduly conservative. In determining condition and yield figures, the separate state averages are derived from (1) list of township correspondents, (2) lists of county correspondents (3) lists of reports to State Statisticians, and (4) the judgment of the State Statistician himself. Extreme and impossible figures reported by correspondents are edited out before the averages are taken.

It is true that speculators have the benefit of the Government estimates, but not to the detriment of the farm-

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ers. Speculators also have the benefit of private crop reporting agencies, maintained by the great commercial organizations, many of which are very good, but which are accessible to very few producers. Producers as a class are not in position to judge of the relative reliability of private crop reports. These range usually within from five to ten per cent above and below the Government reports. Large buyers would be very well informed whether the Government reports were issued or not.

It is probable that only a relatively small percentage of the public fully realize the volume of information relating to agriculture that is being compiled annually, the accessibility of this information, and the further fact that the crop reporting service of the United States is more thorough and complete in its work than that of any other country. It is a clearing house for the statistical information contributed by those interested in agriculture, and it is intended to benefit all who study and utilize the material made available. Constructive criticisms are helpful and should be welcomed abreast of the times. Destructive criticisms are largely the results of error in interpreting the data, misunderstanding, or absolute ignorance of the facts.

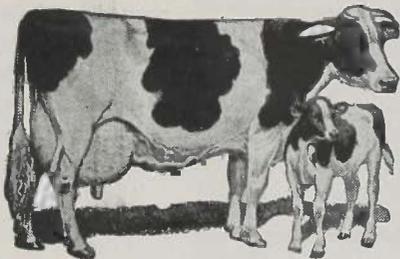
Government crop reports and statistics benefit all classes of people, especially producers, and marketing and distributing agencies; because they relate to the essential facts of production and supply of food and raw materials, and because they are unbiased.

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