

Seed Act Protects Consumers

With the new crop and garden planting season just a short time ahead in the Northeast, seed buyers should be confident that they will buy good seed this year. The Federal Seed Act, and similar laws in all fifty states, provide legal guides and a framework for action

that seed companies seek to live up to through their seed production quality controls.

Seed is offered for sale in many sizes of packages, from a few grams of garden seed to 100 pounds of some farm seeds. Accordingly, the labels of the packages vary in form, but they cannot vary in one respect - they must truthfully represent what is in the package. This is really what the federal and state seed laws are all about, and are often referred to as "truth-in-labeling" acts.

The laws require labeling with information important to buyers of seed, and prohibit labeling or false advertising. In the case of small packets of garden seeds, detailed labeling is not required if the seed meets certain minimum standards.

Our country's seed producing companies, as well as foreign firms that wish to sell seed within the United States, expend many hours in both field and processing plant quality control programs to insure that the package labels correctly describe the seed they offer for sale. If the package is a blend of various types of seed, as is often the case in lawn grass seed, the exact percentage of each kind of seed is carefully monitored in the processing plant. After each "lot" of seed is packaged, employees in the company's quality control operation sample and test each lot to make sure the seed conforms to the listed percentages on the labels or the standards for small packages of garden seeds.

Quality control really begins in the fields where seed-producing plants are grown. An important task in seed production is the elimination of weeds that bear seeds that are contaminants in the seed. Much effort is also taken to get rid of off-type or other unwanted "rogue" plants in the seed-producing field. These must

be eliminated one by one in the field while they are easily visible. It is much easier to get rid of them than to try to eliminate their offspring-seeds from a large batch of tiny seeds in the processing plant. It often takes the sharp eye of an experienced farmer to spot the rogue plants and to care for the well being of the seed-producer plants, which is one reason that a high percentage of the crops grown for seed in this nation are contracted out to farmers.

Another item of intense interest in the world of seed production is the percentage of germination for each lot of seed. The germination rate is an indicator of the health of the seed and the seed's ability to sprout into new little plants. Just as checks of the packaged seed for weeds are made, the seeds of each lot are tested for germination.

One of the methods used to determine germination percentages is much like the old first grade exercise of laying seeds on a wet blotter or paper towel to watch them send out roots and their first two leaves. Of course, seed technologists use highly sophisticated equipment and procedures to do this.

All this effort is made to tell the consumer that a certain percentage of the seeds will sprout if all other conditions are favorable. Farmers and most home gardeners realize that weather, soil condition, and soil-borne diseases and pests all conspire against the planter has neutralized some of these growth inhibitors in one way or another. Germination rates are the planters' chances of getting a good stand of plants. The planter tries to plant his seeds at the right time and provide the best seedbed conditions he can.

Poor judgment in planting or adverse weather could mean a poor row in a garden. To a farmer with one hun-

dred acres of corn or soybeans, a thin stand could mean near-disaster because his income depends on the seed. Poor germination could cost a crop, plus all the time and effort (machinery, fertilizer, taxes, chemicals, etc.), plus the amount of money he paid for the seed in the first place.

To protect himself from having this sort of thing happen, the farmer should plant only cleaned and tested seeds. If any persons suspects that the seed he buys is faulty, he can seek the help of the department of agriculture in his state to invoke the process of the state's seed law. The state agency will report the case to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for action under the Federal Seed Act if the seed had been shipped across state lines. If it is a case involving an interstate shipment, inspectors from his state, USDA, and the originating state would investigate the apparent mislabeling of the seed.

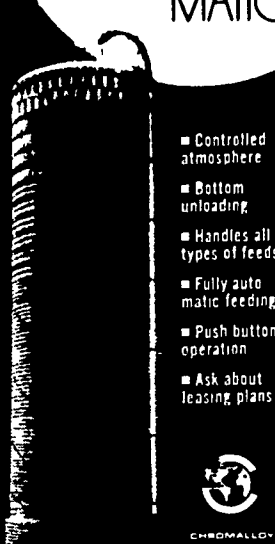
If, in fact, the seed was incorrectly labeled, proceedings would be taken against the offending seed company. If appropriate, the sale of additional seed from the same lot would be stopped and the seed would be seized and held off the market. In some instances, the ultimate outcome of such a case could be a fine imposed on the offending company through the courts.

In all cases of this sort,

whether a slip-up in quality control or a flagrant misrepresentation of the truth, the seed company will lose the confidence of its customers. This is far more important to the seed firm than a small fine, or seed half off the market, since the firm relies on repeat sales each planting season to stay in business.

The seed-buying consumer pays his money for a quality product, and he expects it to perform as promised. For whatever reason, if the seeds in the package do not live up to the claims on the label, or established standards, the state and federal seed laws are the consumer's way to prevent a recurrence to himself or to his neighbors.

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