

Controversy persists as nitrite ban considered

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Prohibiting sodium nitrite in bacon curing could change considerably the foods consumers buy, according to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Clark R. Burbee, departmental economist, said, "A ban on nitrite would end easy availability of cured bacon." This ban would force consumers to buy other foods. "Processors then would have to find other uses for the pork bellies normally turned into bacon."

Consumers spend more than \$2.6 billion annually to buy 1.6 billion pounds of cured bacon.

Burbee said a ban on nitrite for bacon might boost the Consumer Price Index for food within a year by three-tenths to seven-tenths of one per cent and decrease

net farm income by 2.1 to 5.5 per cent.

Nitrite is used in bacon and other processed meats to prevent formation of botulinum toxin, a food poison, to fix the red color and give the flavor consumers associate with those products. But some laboratory analysts have determined nitrite in bacon can interact with protein elements called amines — found in bacon — and produce carcinogenic nitrosamines, cancer-causing chemical compounds.

The department has taken steps to reduce this health threat by lowering the amount of nitrite used to cure bacon. However, a complete ban is being considered since a 1978 study suggests the chemical in itself may be a carcinogen.

At present, no other food additive can replace sodium nitrite.

In developing estimates on effects of a nitrite ban, Burbee and other economists assumed that between 15 to 50 per cent of marketed pork bellies might be eaten as fresh or salt-cured bacon.

"The remaining 50 to 85 per cent would have to be trimmed and used for sausage and luncheon meat. And more pork fat, once sold as bacon, would have to be rendered into low-value lard," Burbee said.

With a 50 per cent diversion of bellies — and cured bacon use cut by 50 per cent — the first-year drop in prices paid to farmers for slaughter-hogs would be 4.09 per cent — about \$1.89 per hundredweight. With an 85 per cent diversion, hog prices would drop 6.9 per cent —

about \$3.19 per hundredweight.

The average price received by farmers for hogs in mid-December was estimated by the department at \$48 per hundredweight.

With 50 per cent diversion, pork meat prices would increase by 2.6 the first year. With 85 per cent diversion, the prices would rise 4.4 per cent. All meat product prices would average 1.0 to 1.9 per cent higher, respectively.

Pork production would fall 432 million pounds — carcass equivalent — the first year, with 50 per cent diversion. And production would drop

by 719 million pounds with pork belly diversion at 85 per cent.

Increases in beef and poultry output would offset about 15 to 20 per cent of the loss in pork output, Burbee estimated. Farm income from hogs could fall by 6.6 per cent to 13 per cent, or \$590 million to \$1.17 billion the first year, according to Burbee's study. Income from corn and soybeans would also fall as less animal feed would be needed to produce fewer hogs.

Diversion of pork belly trimmings into lard could boost lard production by 36

to 61 per cent. Federally inspected lard output in 1977 totaled nearly a billion pounds. Larger supplies of lard could depress soybean oil prices by 1.4 to 2.5 cents a pound, and soybean prices by 8 to 13 cents a bushel.

Timing a ban could be crucial, Burbee said. "If it were imposed while red meat production was at a low point, the first-year price impact would be more dramatic. The lower hog prices also could discourage producers, resulting in a more rapid liquidation of stock and a faster short-time drop in prices."

Dairy quotas pondered

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — A dairy quota provision on foreign trade and a defense of the federal milk marketing order program were the main focuses of attention of dairy farmers at the American Farm Bureau Federation Dairy Conference held earlier this month at the 60th annual meeting.

The current dairy provision in the GATT negotiations will put a 67-million pound quota on foreign cheese imports. James H. Starkey, assistant special trade representative for Agricultural Affairs, said the quota system will put a ceiling on imported cheese affecting mostly higher priced types.

"The quota system will allow increases in Swiss and other higher priced cheeses, not cheddar or American type cheeses which have been the biggest area of foreign competition for U.S. produced cheese, Starkey said.

Herbert L. Forest, director of the USDA Dairy Division Marketing Service, said there should be little

adverse affect on domestic dairy prices from the GATT provision.

Forest also defended the federal milk marketing order program.

More cattle foreseen

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — In spite of the fact that retail beef prices have risen to a level which could produce consumer resistance, the cycle of cattle numbers appears to have bottomed out and numbers will start increasing this year.

This was the forecast of Dr. Ed Uvacek, Jr., professor of livestock marketing at Texas A & M University, one of the participants in the recent Livestock Conference at the 60th Annual Meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

The price levels of live cattle are now such that producers will not be able to resist the urge to rebuild herds in the near future, Dr. Uvacek predicted. He indicated that he expects the next peak in cattle numbers

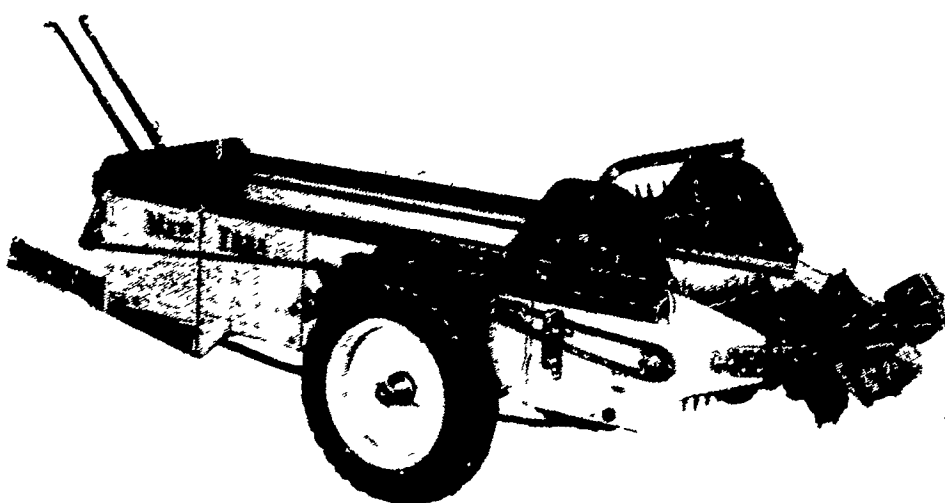
"The program has been achieving for more than 40 years the orderly marketing and public interest objectives laid down by Congress," Forest said.

to be reached in the mid-eighties when cattle numbers would again reach high levels. The benefits of improved prices may not be enjoyed by consumers at that time due to the impact of continued inflation, he said.

Richard Lyng, the president of the American Meat Institute, another conference participant, stuck by his prediction of sharp increases in hamburger prices. He emphasized that livestock and meat industry people face tremendous difficulties in the months ahead from increasing governmental regulations and interference in the operations of their businesses by bureaucratic rules.

An overflow audience attended the livestock session.

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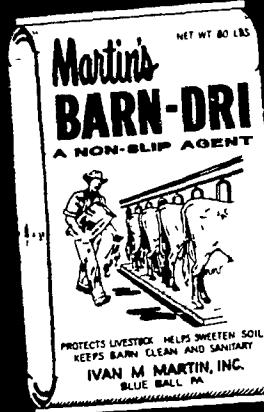


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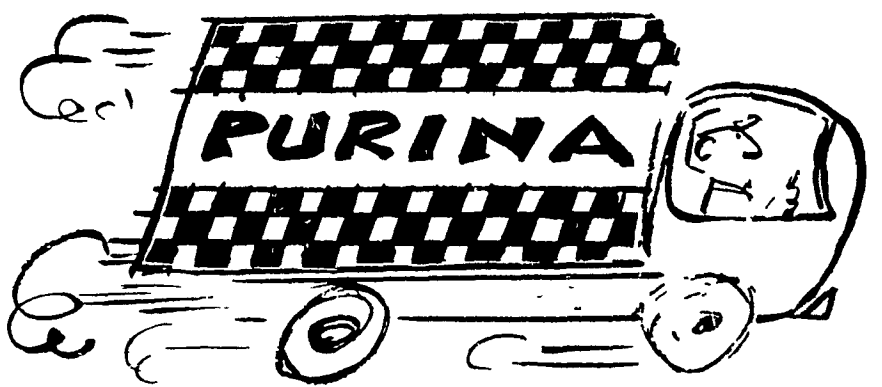
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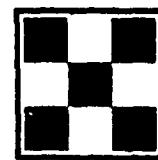
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