

Food Producers Compete for Sales

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By Ferdie J. Deering

Farmers must compete with each other in order for their commodities to find places on the nation's dinner tables.

This seldom-discussed problem came into focus when R.A. Lotspeich of Rosston, president of Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association, and industry leaders enlisted aid of food retailers to step up beef consumption.

In spite of a sharp outback in hog production, supplies of beef and other meats turned out to be larger this year than had been predicted and cattle prices slipped. Consumers ate other meats.

Effects of the promotion to "Make Ends Meat — with the great taste of beef" — instead of something else. It is part of a national campaign by the Beef Industry Council of the National Livestock and Meat Board.

The amount of foods that people eat apparently has changed little over the past 20 years, according to reports, averaging 1,463 pounds per person in 1979. However, composition of American diets is continually changing, with price a significant factor in shifts.

Diet fads, health scares, convenience preparation and new packaging, as well as availability through fast food outlets, also are important influences on our diets. We like changes.

Some agricultural leaders insist that in order for any commodity to get its share of markets growers must promote its use to customers and potential

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An Illinois farm store features T-shirts that promote commodities, with slogans like:

'Sows Aren't Fined for Littering'

'Milk Puts You in a Good Moo-o-d'

'Peas on Earth'

'Cattlemen Have a Legitimate Beef'

'Take a Real Tomato to Lunch'

'Never Give a Heifer a Bum Steer'

customers. Others argue that it is futile for farmers to try to switch consumers from one farm product to another.

Nevertheless, while sponsors reluctantly admit intra-agricultural competition, vigorous promotion to do just that is going on locally, nationally and internationally. Oklahoma has created commissions to receive funds from producers to be used for research and promotion.

The largest is the Oklahoma Wheat Commission, which collects ¾-cent per bushel in a check-off program. A spokesman explains that since about 80 percent of our wheat must be exported "it's important that foreign markets be developed and maintained." There also is a peanut commission, pork commission and a pecan commission.

Cotton is promoted through a national program set up in 1966 with a check-off system to fund research for new uses for cotton and large-scale advertising. Popularity of skin-tight jeans has made this promotion appear successful, and some new

cotton uses have been found.

For years dairymen relied upon public support and federal laws restricting sale of competitive margarine to keep up demand for milk. When these failed, dairymen turned to milk marketing orders to help regulate supplies and increased funding of advertising through the American Dairy Association. The competitive situation was reflected in a campaign that advised: "Take a coffee break; drink milk."

Another aspect of intra-agricultural competition showed up recently when the Grain Sorghum Producers Association, Lubbock, Texas, complained that the Commodity Credit Corp. had sold almost a million bushels of government-owned corn in West Texas.

GSPA said this was corn that had been bought by CCC from grain exporters who had contracted it for shipment to Russia before the embargo went into effect. GSPA said the sale was made "in competition with and at the expense of High Plains grain producers."

Another problem that

has developed in competition for the nation's tables is appropriation of labels developed by producers of one product for use on another. A federal court ruled this month that "turkey ham" may be marketed with the qualifier "cured turkey thigh meat." Pork producers aren't happy. They say ham comes only from hogs.

Beef producers may get into the act, too, because another product called "turkey franks" has appeared on the market.

Not all product promotions succeed. Last September Sears offered a broad selection of gift packages of food in a 16-page catalog section featuring steaks at \$16.50 per pound. Sears officials were disappointed with only 35 percent sales gain. One said "the page that did the worst from our estimates was meats."

Perhaps customers figured they could get a better buy on steaks from their local butchers. They could right now, anyway.