



Potato producer Maurice

Costs up but retail price down

Potato producer price squeeze

by Dave McCausland
The potato producer in North Simcoe is caught in a price squeeze between declining retail prices and rising equipment and supply costs. Many have significant quantities of potatoes they cannot sell for enough to pay for the packaging and shipping, let alone the actual cost of production.

One of the Tiny Township farmers caught in this situation is Gabriel Maurice. He has been growing potatoes for 35 years and says "I've never seen it so bad." He has been unable to get \$1.25 for a 75 pound bag of potatoes — which costs him over \$2.00 to produce. And if he hopes to sell those potatoes in Toronto he will have to take a 50 cent shipping charge and the 35 cents cost of the bag itself out of the \$1.25 they are willing to pay. Forty cents is left to offset his \$2.00 production cost.

Maurice blames part of the problem on the shipment of potatoes from Prince Edward Island to Ontario. The Federal Government subsidizes the cost of shipping those potatoes and so they are able to compete with the locally grown product. He said the PEI farmer isn't reaping the benefits of this subsidy, however, since he is also barely getting the cost of production back from his sale.

Another aspect of the

problem is the rapid rise in the last few years in the cost of fertilizer. Maurice said it is now costing at least four times the amount of 10 years ago. The price is now running at approximately \$200 per ton, he said.

Various solutions have been proposed. Maurice thinks that Ontario farmers should receive some sort of subsidy.

Omer Marion, another potato farmer in the area, has a different approach to the problem. For the last few years, he has been gradually reducing the number of acres he plants. This year he said he expects to plant only 12 to 15 acres instead of the 22 and 25 acres he planted a few years back.

He blamed part of the cost squeeze on the brokerage system involved in the sale of the potatoes. The broker's fee amounts to a significant part of the retail cost and he said "I don't think the consumer's getting a fair deal for what the farmer's getting."

One possible solution to the problem of this cost-price

squeeze might be some sort of marketing plan on the part of the farmers. Ross Whiteside, who grows potatoes near Alliston, produces solely processing potatoes, that is, potatoes designed for commercial production of French fries, for example. He has been involved in setting up the Ontario Potato Bargaining Committee, a group which deals with the processors on behalf of the producers. The processor has only to negotiate with the one agency instead of a number of individual farmers. With their connections to other similar groups in other provinces, the bargaining committee can keep informed of the situation in the rest of the country.

Whiteside says that it is "advisable to have a marketing plan to control acreage." Too many potatoes are being produced at the present time, he said, and some reduction is vital. He suggested that a livestock diversion plan was one of the things he would

like to see in operation. This would be similar to a scheme in PEI in which the farmer receives a supported price of \$1.80 per 100 pounds of potatoes which would be used to feed livestock. This would give the farmer some knowledge of what he could expect for his crop under such a plan.

Some sort of marketing arrangement seems to be inevitable if the farmers are to get a fair return on their investment. The only thing to be decided now is what form this will take. Whether it will take the form of a full-blown marketing board such as exists for pork and eggs, for example, or of some intermediate arrangement remains to be seen.

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