Sugar prices put lid on fruit bottling

By Kathy Helms
Deseret News staff writer

Housewives just aren't canning and bottling as much this summer as they did last year, and representatives of the jar, paraffin and produce industries point to skyrocketing sugar costs as one big reason.

Sugar isn't the only factor, of course. Sealing wax costs the wholesalers $3.91 per case this year, compared with $3.77 at the end of 1973. And a broker for Kerr jars estimates his bottles have jumped over 12.5 percent in cost since last summer.

Utahns are finding fresh fruit and vegetables harder to find each year too, what with subdivisions taking over orchards and farms.

In addition, the '74 apricot crop was almost totally destroyed by frost and many strawberry farmers switched to other crops.

In an earlier report, the Deseret News found that canning lids seem to be causing more trouble this year — some housewives report that one or two lids "just don't seal" in every batch of home canned fruits. This could account for a few families getting discouraged.

But sugar is the villain. Granulated sugar cost wholesalers $14.53 per hundred pounds on Sept. 14. Today, the same bag gets $33.05, an increase of 127.46 percent. And costs passed along to the consumer are even higher: July 31 prices showed $1.75 per five pound bag — 140 percent higher than last August's figures.

Altogether, that picture isn't helping the situation for dealers in other areas of the home canning business. Wayne Cook, president of Wayne Cook, Inc., which handles the MCP Pectin account in this area, said "sales aren't as good as they were last year, and they should be better.

"Last year," the broker said, "we sold more pectin in August than we did in May, June and July. But it's not taking off this year like it did last," and sugar is the villain.

Cook predicted if sugar costs continue to spiral, "actual usage of home canned fruit and fruit on the shelf is going to become less and less. Fruit isn't a luxury, but it's certainly something we can do without."

Brokers of Kerr and Ball jars gave a similar, pessimistic report; although, contrary to the pectin broker, they are selling just about the jars they can supply.

Joseph R. Ray, president, Ray & Whitney Brokerage Co., which handles Kerr, says the jars have jumped some 12.5 percent in price since last year.

"I'm amazed costs went up so little, frankly," he said. "When you deal in jars, you're talking about silica, soda ash, steel in the lids, fiberboard cases and printing costs...and all of these went up in price."

Ray, who also handles canned fruits and vegetables, says he's seen these costs double, and sugar prices for the company he represents have tripled.

The reason for the difference in price jumps, of course, lies in the fact that "farm products, meat products and that other stuff inside the cans is more expensive than the air inside a Kerr jar."

Mrs. A. G. Christensen, canning office secretary for Welfare Square, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, concurred.

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Sugar has bottlers flipping their lids

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Sugar costs "sure have made our job harder," she said, and "not as many people are canning because they're taking a second look of its rising costs. Many, however, still decide to can because they realize when the prices go up for us, they go up in the stores, too."

Surprisingly, the only stable price in canning seems to be the cost of fruits and vegetables — the items housewives want to preserve.

"Dee Howell, produce manager for Associated Food Stores, says his end of the business is causing no problems whatsoever. "The only reason fruit looks glum," he added, "is because of the accessories and the sugar that go into it."

"Howell has his own index which told him there is "much less interest in the part of a housewife to can than there was a year ago." He measured the canning interest by the sale of sweet cherries and raspberries, two commodities which sold at prices this year as low as or lower than 1973 prices.

Despite this, "the demand for these products has been less. Sugar and jars have risen so sharply that people are taking a second look into canning their own commodities."

The prospect? It appears both good and bad.

Pectin, Cook said, is plentiful. And Gene Williams, account executive for Marketing Specialists, Inc., which handles Ball jars, says "with the high cost of sugar, there will be adequate jars to supply all the people."

Fruits and vegetables are generally in good supply, too, although, John Riley, produce manager for Utah Wholesale Fruit & Produce Co. admits this whole year has seen "apricots over the hill."

"If canners can buy sugar, they'll have things to put up," he added.

And Robins Brokerage executive Garmer Player said consumers also will be able to buy the sugar — "if they're willing to pay the price for it."