

MAY 2, 1952

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Wheat For Our Daily Bread

IT is sometimes said of farmers that they will not grow wheat, or any other sort of produce, unless the price attracts them. They are certainly like the rest of us, in that they expect adequate payment for their risks and labours. Lately, however, the possible shortage of wheat became a question of national interest and urgency. The situation was examined in *Grow More Wheat*, a series of broadcasts addressed mainly to country listeners. All the speakers were experts. Their purpose was to explain why wheat production is dangerously low (less than 100,000 acres this year, though we shall need the produce of about 350,000 acres), and to suggest how the drift can be stopped.

It is generally found that an examination of any problem brings out matters which have been overlooked or explained too simply in casual discussion. Mr. W. W. Mulholland, for instance, was able to point out that there is no single reason for the decline in wheat growing. Higher prices for other products have undoubtedly been a factor, but so has the weather and the high cost of machinery. Farmers may have been influenced by certain fears and prejudices—the fear that soil fertility will be depleted, and a reluctance to undertake tasks which required much effort in days when little help could be given by machines. It is true, as Professor A. H. Flay said at the beginning of his talk, that wheat cropping depletes soil fertility. But he went on to describe the practices, now widely used and understood, by which fertility and weed control can be maintained. The truth is that a great deal more wheat can be grown than at present, without harm to the soil and without undue effort or risk. Prices for other farm products are less competitive; machinery, though costly, is available for essential work; and the

weather will have to be disastrously bad if it is to be comparable with what was endured last season.

Mr. A. J. Danks also spoke of the fears which can retard production—above all, perhaps the fear that our prosperity will vanish. There is, he said, no threat of a slump in the world today. "Such risks as there are . . . come from too little production, not too much." Farmers will think of these matters from a practical point of view; they may be expected to take notice of Mr. Mulholland's claim that there are sound business incentives for wheat-growing. But no discussion about food can be isolated from the wider background. The world, said Mr. Danks "always a hungry place, is threatened today as much as ever in the past with want, with lack of enough to eat. We stand morally committed to make our acres yield as much food as possible." Moreover, production must be planned, as far as it can be without loss of freedom, to avoid wasteful overlapping or untimely shortages. We must not neglect staple crops and so become obliged to import excessive quantities of grain needed for countries with low food-production and large populations. The emphasis in farming shifts, as it is bound to do, among the fluctuations of supply and demand; but there is no change in the principle that basic needs must be served. And today the pressing need is for wheat. There is already evidence that farmers are planning to increase their sowings. The Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Holyoake, was last week able to say that reports of orders for seed wheat were "most encouraging." Bread rationing need not be feared if farmers, now that the situation has been explained to them, do what they can to meet a difficulty that could become an emergency.