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Your Protection... That Ceiling Price

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Jean Ross outlines the government's system of price ceilings and its effects on homemaking.

It's "guard duty" for the homemaker on the anti-inflation front, according to government experts, who point out that each individual must sit tight on the cost-of-living lid if inflation is to be prevented. Curtailed consumer manufacture plus more money available for consumer spending equals a perfect setup for higher prices, say economists, and when these conditions became serious early this year, the government acted by placing a ceiling on prices of goods purchased after May 18, 1942. That ceiling, or top price the seller is permitted to charge, was set at the highest price charged in March, 1942, for most goods and services.

The features of this system, never before tried in this country, are not as bewildering as they first appear. In the first place, each seller has his own individual ceiling on prices; that ceiling must be the top price he charged for the same product in March. For example, there will be a top price for each type and each quality of stockings.

Food presented the most baffling problem to government price regulations. Nearly every kind of food, from spaghetti to chewing gum, is included on the "fixed price" list. Exempt from ceiling prices, according to the present plan, are butter, cheese, canned milk products, poultry, eggs, fresh fruits and vegetables (except bananas), mutton and lamb, fresh fish, sea food, game, dried prunes, dry beans and nuts. In addition, any prepared food, such as that from a hotel, restaurant or delicatessen, has no ceiling price.

The reasons for these exemptions are several. In some cases, as with fresh fish, the March price was not up to the level required by the Emergency Price Control Act before a ceiling would be permitted.

There are no exemptions in clothing, but there still are problems. Styles change, and it is difficult for a law to say that one style is worth as much as another. If the consumer refuses to buy when he feels he is being overcharged, however, he will be making a major contribution to the effectiveness of the act, for overcharging will then be discouraged among retailers.

Careful attention to quality of the product and to its label will help guarantee that the consumer is purchasing goods of the same quality as those he bought in March.

There are no ceilings on public utilities, as many of them are regulated by other governmental agencies, but other services, such as laundries, cleaners, garages, shoe shines and diaper service are rigidly controlled. On the exemption list are such services as doctors, dentists, taxicabs, entertainment and beauty parlors.

Partial protection is afforded the consumer, through the requirement that the storekeeper show his record of March prices to anyone who wishes to see it and through the required posting of ceiling prices on all cost-of-living articles. The latter are those goods and services, named by the OPA, which are most important to people in their daily living. As for other goods, the consumer must protect himself by producing receipts of purchases made in March, if possible, or by noting prices he is paying now, to help keep track of increases later.

There the consumer's responsibility ends. The policing of the regulations will be handled by the OPA, which is empowered to inflict penalties of fines up to $500, a year in prison, or both. Licenses to do business may be revoked for as long as a year.

It is important for consumers to avoid fighting among themselves to obtain the few goods available. If housewives enjoying increased spending power insist on buying goods regardless of their price in relation to their quality, the government will be forced to adopt further anti-inflation policies—perhaps more rigid rationing or higher taxes.

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