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EDITORIAL

UNIFORM NATURAL RUBBER

AN article in this number draws attention to certain aspects of natural rubber production as compared to the synthetic products. The present system of grading natural rubber on appearance has long been recognised as rather remote from its processing characteristics and intrinsic value in many manufactured products. The minute attention paid by graders to small defects, or so-called defects are often regarded by producers as merely a device to cut prices. Not that they do not recognise that grading was necessary, but there is a general feeling that the characters on which it has been and is still based were themselves uncorrelated to real value. The appearance of standard quality synthetics whose processing behaviour could be accurately stated and held constant over large batches has introduced a product having a feature valuable to manufacturers which has hitherto been lacking in natural rubber. The variability of natural rubber has become recognised as a serious disadvantage now that uniform synthetics are easily available. It is not a question so much of the merits or demerits of the best natural compared to synthetics as to the inability of manufacturers to depend on any consignment of natural to repeat the manufacturing behaviour of another consignment having the same grade based on appearance. It is this variability which has come to be recognised as one of the most serious disadvantages of natural.

The French and Dutch producers in Indo-China and the Netherlands East Indies have already realised this feature of the natural product and have taken active steps to overcome it. They have recognised that to meet the menace of synthetics it will be necessary to apply all the technical resources available to produce a high-grade and uniform product. In order to do this they have accepted the idea that centralised factories, or at least very large factories, are necessary so that latex can be bulked and each batch tested for its physical manufacturing qualities and marketed with a guaranteed standard of performance. While the bulking of latex is obviously the best

method of producing large batches of standard quality, since each can be tested for its physical and chemical characters, the grading of crepe and smoked sheet on a performance basis and less on conventional appearance may have possibilities.

The French and Dutch authorities have agreed to using standard marking for bales having agreed characteristics and the methods of determining these have been tentatively accepted. There are now coming onto the markets parcels of natural rubber which can be bought on a performance basis and not merely on appearance, so that a manufacturer interested in using a particular grade can obtain it with surity and reduce losses from rejects which inevitably occur when purchases have to be made on appearance.

It will be easily apparent that with standardised natural rubber becoming available from two of the largest producers and with Malaya taking a very active interest and likely to follow suit soon, a new menace to Ceylon rubber has arisen. In the near future it will have to contend not only against synthetics but also against uniform natural rubber.

The Far Eastern producers have certain advantages over Ceylon, particularly as regards the topography of their large estates and their higher acreage of high-yielding clones. The centralising of manufacture will there be easier than will be the case in Ceylon, where many small and relatively inefficient properties giving low yields abound. The problem of reducing production costs in Ceylon, quite apart from any standardisation, has already been realised and some form of amalgamation, including factory concentration, is under active consideration. If this can be combined with the production of uniform grades marketed under guaranteed marks it may be possible for the better properties in Ceylon to compete with the uniform products of other producers. The amount of progress in producing uniform rubber may be gauged by an interesting publication of the Syndicat des Planteurs of Saigon, "Communication aux Planteurs No. 3" issued early in 1949, which gives detailed instructions for the production of standard grades. These grades are specified in another publication of the Institut des recherches sur le caoutchouc en Indochine entitled "Les caoutchouc spécifiés". In Malaya, Indochina and the N. E. I. special bodies have been set up to consider ways and means of establishing the manufacture of uniform, tested grades and, with the advantages these countries possess, there can be no doubt that specified products will soon be appearing on the markets in considerable quantities. The unspecified product of unknown viscosity and curing behaviour will then meet a new and very dangerous competitor.