New Hampshire
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Weights and Measures in New Hampshire

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"The principal object of this work is to create a barrier which will overcome temptation to be dishonest."— Harold A. Webster, Commissioner of Weights and Measures 1919-1931

Harold A. Webster, the first commissioner, of the original Department of Weights and Measures, stated that, "the underlying principles of the weights and measures law affects more people than do any other laws on the statue books."

In 1920, during the first year of the Department's existence, inspectors seized over three thousand incorrect or fraudulent weighing and measuring devices. The description of some of these devices are both intriguing and disturbing. Bushel baskets with smaller baskets woven on the inside. Five-gallon measures with a 3-gallon can hidden inside. Liquid measures being used to illegally sell dry commodities (the difference being about 14%). Another clever way to cheat was to place heavy items, such as a small metal ingot, into the cavity of a whole chicken in the meat case. After weighing, the clerk would tip the bird and drop the ingot into a box of sawdust.

We take accurate weights and measures for granted as we go about purchasing our daily commodities of food and fuel, in addition to a myriad of other commodities or services. Enforcement and surveillance of trade practices and the use of correct and suitable weighing and measuring devices over the past 85 years has enabled this to happen.

Although some of the methods to cheat are more technically sophisticated today, the now Bureau of Weights and Measures (part of the NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food) mission to ensure equity in the marketplace still continues. Some of the other recently added responsibilities are:

1. Price verification—The majority of transactions today are processed via scanners. The bureau is charged with ensuring that the prices posted are the prices scanned.

2. Posting of prices—The weights and measures act mandates that grocery stores, including convenience stores, post the prices of their food items. A customer should not have to ask the clerk what the price of an item is before a purchase is decided upon.

3. Open Dating—Sell-by-dates and best if used by dates are important considerations in a consumer's decision to purchase perishable or semi-perishable commodities. Investigators spend time looking at these commodities to ensure that the inventory is being regularly rotated.

In 1920, the Department of Weights and Measures was staffed with three inspectors, one clerk and the commissioner. Today, the Bureau has the same number of people and does its best to protect the interests of New Hampshire citizens. Whether it is a cord of wood or a yard of loam, a gallon of milk or a gallon of gasoline, a dry quart of blueberries or a liquid quart salad dressing, a five-pound shipping package or 5 tons of animal feed, the staff strives to keep commerce fair.

For more information, contact The Division of Weights & Measures, NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food, tel. 271-3700, www.agriculture.nh.gov.