

Now 69c a Head

Price of Lettuce Rises 20 Cents in a Month

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more than a head of lettuce

Iceberg lettuce now is selling for 69 cents a head at the Washington area's three largest supermarket chains, an increase of up to 20 cents a head in one month.

Lettuce now costs about twice as much this June as it did last year because, according to industry officials, unfavorable weather conditions in California have resulted in a small crop of poor quality lettuce.

One downtown eating establishment, the Rothschild Cafeteria, now charges 10 cents extra for putting lettuce on sandwiches. Ilse Rothschild, the owner, said she used to pay \$6.50 for a case of lettuce, but recently the price has increased up to \$20 for the same size case.

Ruth Jamerson of Southeast Washington was shopping at the Town House Food Store (affiliated with the Safeway

chain) at 21st and K Streets NW this week when she picked up an 11-ounce head of lettuce, looked at it in disgust and said:

"Look at this. It's lousy. It's a shame you have to pay 70 cents for this." Rifling through the lettuce bin she rejected each head and went home empty-handed.

John Shepherd, spokesman for Safeway Stores Inc., said, "I've never seen lettuce of such poor quality and high price in my 12 years here."

The iceberg lettuce in most Washington food stores now comes from the Salinas Valley in California, according to Charles Magoon, director of information for the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association. The weather in late February, when the lettuce presently on the market was

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69 cents "to remain competitive."

Thomas Gallahan, Grand Union's produce merchandiser, agreed with Scher and Shepherd that the lettuce boycott advocated by the United Farm Worker Union has nothing to do with the high price of lettuce, nor has it decreased sales.

At the French Market in Georgetown, part-owner Robert Jacob was astonished to learn that his 55-cent-a-head lettuce was cheaper than in supermarkets. "I should look at that," he said. "I certainly don't want to sell it for less than everywhere else."

Alternatives to iceberg lettuce cost nearly as much with

Boston and Romaine lettuce generally selling at 59 cents a pound.

Supermarket spokesmen expressed concern that the prices of other produce items would escalate, because of shortages caused by poor growing conditions last year.

Potatoes are the prime example. At Safeway, for example, they have shown a steady rise in price from 69 cents for a five pound bag in January to 98 cents for the same bag today.

Shepherd said that "normally at this time of year the Eastern states are supplied from potatoes picked last October and stored.

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planted, interrupted normal sowing schedules of farmers, he said.

The National Climatic Center in Asheville, N.C. reported that the Salinas Valley received 100 per cent more rainfall in February than the 88-year average that is considered normal.

The valley has two weather reporting stations. One reported 5.3 inches of rain in February, up from the normal 2.65 inches, and the other reported 4.92 inches, up from the normal 2.37 inches.

This disturbed not only lettuce planting, but also growing conditions.

Shepherd said this was

shown by the decrease in the weight of lettuce. A normal crate of 24 heads weighs 45 to 48 pounds, he said. "At one point this year the crates weighed only 35 pounds."

At Safeway, lettuce cost 49 cents a head on May 1, and 69 cents yesterday.

At Giant Food, Inc. communications manager Barry Scher, said the rainy season also was responsible for Giant's 69-cent lettuce, up from 55 cents May 1. Last year at this time Giant's lettuce cost 35 cents a head.

At Grand Union Supermarkets lettuce prices have gone from 49 cents to 69 cents within the past month, although the price will go down

to 59 cents today because the heads are so small, a spokesman said. A year ago the Grand Union price was 29 cents a head.

Asked why the three major chains all charged the same price for lettuce, Paul Karody, director of consumer and environmental affairs for the National Association of Food Chains, said "competitive reasons." He denied there is price fixing.

Karody estimated that it costs about 57 cents a head to get lettuce to the Washington area warehouse, plus shipping charges to the individual stores. He said he believed some stores may be losing money on lettuce, but charge