

Worms: A Fairy Tale with Purpose
By Ernie Whiteside

Once upon a time there was a land far, far away in a place that never was. All of the people of that land sustained themselves by fishing. All who fished required worms to do so.

Competition for worms was a serious thing. Not every fisherman was equally skilled at finding worms and this put some at a disadvantage. Many fishermen spent much of their time unproductively searching for worms only to find inferior worms left behind by other more skilled wormers.

The wisest and most skilled fisherman understood that the secret to catching more fish was to start with a quality worm. Some of the most successful fisherman claimed that their success was due to a balance of superior worm finding and superior fishing. Others saw that while their fishing skills were superior, they lacked the patience or skill to find quality worms. So, skilled wormers who lacked fishing skills traded quality worms for fish. Most fishermen lacked adequate worming skills but were not willing to trade fish for worms; they thought the cost of the worms was too high. It cost two fish to buy a dozen worms. Some people were just poor fisherman as well and so lacked the ability to buy quality worms, even if they wanted to.

The counselors of the king of this fairy tale nation saw that without worms the people could not prosper and so they proposed a plan whereby skilled wormers would be employed by the government to find worms and provide them to the fisherman at no charge. As these skilled wormers would not have time to fish, each and every fisherman would be fairly taxed of their catch to feed the government wormers. It was estimated that then new government program could provide worms at a cost of one fish per dozen worms, which was half the going rate of worms.

Some extremists complained that there was no such thing as free worms and that the program would eventually drive up the cost of worms and bring every wormer and fisherman under the yoke of government. At first the program seemed to be a great success. But then unexpected problems began to emerge.

The skilled wormers complained that they could not compete with the free worm handouts offered by the government. The price of private worms dropped to one fish for a dozen worms. Many private wormers went out of business. The government worming jobs did not pay as well as their private worming business had, but some went to work as government wormers anyway. Others just went back to fishing, even though they were not good fishers. A few continued to privately worm for the few fishers that would pay.

The quality of worms being issued for free by the government was only average so some of the fisherman either foraged for their own worms or paid the few remaining private wormers to find them quality worms. Eventually the most skilled wormers found that they could still make more money by selling worms privately than working for the government. When supply and demand finally balanced the price of worms returned to two fish for a dozen worms. Private worm buyers now bore both the cost of the fish tax for free worms and the cost of the higher quality private worms.

With the most skilled wormers working in the private sector, the quality of free worms dropped and the production of fisherman using free worms also dropped. So the counselors of the king suggested that the government also employ people to ensure that the standard of worms being issued be improved. This of course meant that they would have to increase the fish tax but it was expected that the tax would be more than offset by increases in production and the new cost of providing free worms would be no more than two fish per dozen worms.

The new managers imposed strict standards of quality on wormers. Wormers that wanted to work for the government would have to be trained and certified with annual continuing education requirements. The managers identified successful steps of worming and demanded that all wormers comply with the new procedures for worming. Many of the best wormers resisted, they did not see the new procedures as an improvement and finally they left the government and went back to fishing or found opportunities in the

private worming sector. So the quality of free government worms continued to drop and with it the production of the fisherman also dropped.

At the same time production was dropping, the cost of managing the free worm programs was going up. Managers complained that the demand for free worms was simply so great that they could not provide them both the quality and the quantity without spending more, it now cost three fish for a dozen worms.

The consumers of free government worms began to notice that those who foraged for their own worms or bought worms privately prospered while the free worm crowd struggled to make a living. The free wormers wanted to have access to the same quality of worms that the private wormers had. So, the counselors of the king got together and devised a plan where-by all of fisherman would be able to apply for a subsidy to buy worms in the private market.

The new subsidy would be paid directly to the private wormer and would be one fish per dozen worms. Fisherman could buy worms from any qualifying wormer but would have to pay the difference between market rate and the subsidy. Wormers that wanted to qualify for the subsidy could continue to manage their business privately as they had before and could continue to charge the market rate for their worms. The only requirement to qualify would be to register with the government free worm program. The new program would ease cost pressures on the free worm program and subsidies would cost the government considerably less than the free worms did.

Some extremists complained that now was the time to admit failure and scale the program back, not enlarge it. They said if the program continued as designed it would lead to a world where nobody was free for forage for worms and that even the private wormers would all be yoked the same as the government free wormers. The program proceeded over their objections.

Many of the fishermen who had previously paid for private worms without any government assistance suddenly found it necessary to apply for the new subsidy. After all, they paid the fish tax just like everyone else. This together with administration costs increased the cost of the program above the expected cost.

As the number of fisherman enrolled in the subsidy program increased, demand outstripped supply and the cost of buying private worms went up. The best wormers in the free worm program began to find more attractive jobs in the private sector. In order to continue to provide free worms, the government found that they needed to pay wormers more and even though the advisors to the king thought that the cost of running government free worm programs would go down as a result of the subsidy, the actual costs went up.

Participants in the new private worm subsidy program began to feel that the cost of the private worms was being inflated unfairly and complained to the free worm ministry. The price of private worms was now four fish per dozen and the subsidy was only one fish per dozen. So, the free worm ministry placed a statutory limit on how much private wormers participating in the subsidy program could charge for worms and increased the subsidy. The new statutory limit would be four fish per dozen which was still slightly less than the free worm program and the new subsidy was 2 fish per dozen, less than half the cost of providing free worms.

Free worm program managers began to complain that there was no way to be sure that private worms being bought with the subsidy meet the same standards as free worms. It was possible that some unscrupulous private wormers were ripping off the public. So, the advisors to the king devised a plan for licensing private wormers. Private wormers would still own and manage their business, but would have to be certified by the government free worm program in order to collect the subsidy.

Private wormers resisted, but in the end, the private worm subsidy was two fish per dozen worms and they were also getting another two fish per dozen worms from the enrolled fisherman so they accepted the new certification program.

Administering the new private wormer subsidy certification proved to even more expensive than managing the free worm certification program and the fish tax simply had to go up. Complaints about the high cost of

the fish tax prompted government to reduce the subsidy and demand that certified private wormers lower their price again.

A very few wormers and fisherman refused to participate in this ridiculous program. The cost of finding your own worms hadn't changed and the black market sale of quality worms made it possible for many fishermen to continue to pay the same two fish per dozen worms that they had always paid, so long as everyone involved was able to avoid the fish tax. Certified wormers began to complain that they couldn't accept the new reductions in price without some protection from foragers and black markets.

The advisors to the king finally agreed to make foragers purchase foraging licenses, which would ensure that they gained no advantage in the marketplace. Additional agents were also hired by the free worm program to find and report unlicensed foragers and those who were evading the fish tax. The cost of the free fish program went up again.

Who says a free worm program is a bad thing?

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