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Submission No 99

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Inquiry 30 March, 2009 - Submissions

My name is Catherine Titasey and I have lived on Thursday Island for 15 years

I am married to an Islander who is approaching his life expectancy. I am keen to have him around for many more years and so aim to purchase and prepare healthy food.

I have had the benefit of hearing the evidence from Mayors Fred Gela and Pedro Stephen and from CEO, Richard Bowler but I had to leave after 4 hours. I will raise issues not referred to.

My husband and I have a relatively low income. We have 4 children but I am often feeding others. I buy all our fresh produce from IBIS and rely on the specials offered most weeks. I applaud IBIS for making these available in the recent past.

My submissions fall into the following headings:

1. Waste of fruit and vegetables.
2. Scanning errors.
3. Freight.
4. Store airconditioning.

WASTE OF FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

My husband and I have a garden and until about six months ago, we were able to take the damaged fresh fruit and vegetables from IBIS on TI for composting and for our chooks. Every couple of days there was considerable waste in the order of wheelie bins/boxes/trolleys full rotten or slightly spoiled produce disposed of. If I had not previously arranged to take the produce, it would be loaded into the wheelie bins which I was not able to empty. If I asked early enough for it to be left out, I could remove boxes of generally slightly damaged fruit and vegetables.

On one occasion (late September, 2008) I took several ute loads of predominantly cabbage, lettuce and celery. I asked the manager why there was more waste than usual. He replied, 'we over ordered and the fresh stuff has come in.' Most of this could have been offered at a discount. I believe much of this waste has come about through mismanagement and the situation has worsened in the past six months when the long term fresh produce assistant left. I now see food left to rot on the shelves while recently arrived fresh produce in the chiller is similarly starting to spoil.

When the shelves are bare, I have, many times, asked if a staff member could fetch other boxes. On these occasions, I am told that the fruit and veg assistant is 'not at work today' or 'hasn't come in' and I would have to make do with what was on the shelves.

There is a practice, at least among the white community, to simply go into the chiller themselves, find what they need and place it on the shelves.

On the day of the inquiry, I went into IBIS and found the fresh food section packed for the first time in months although the lettuce had wilted and the capsicum were dimpled. Also, the meat shelves have been about 30% full for at least 6 months. On 30 March, the meat shelves were full. Full shelves are unusual.

Suggestions:

1. Discount food that is starting to spoil (this has happened in the mid to late 90's and again in 2001).
2. Train staff in competent food handling.
3. If staff don't show for work in the fruit and veg section, pull staff from the non-perishable section so fresh produce can be offered for sale.

SCANNING ERRORS

The most recent installation of checkouts meant the consumer could not see the checkout screen. This has been changed but was there a cost? How could the manager comprehend a screen that could not be seen by the consumer?

Once or twice a week, I will be over charged. I've been told the scanned prices are set in Cairns at IBIS head office. I have been over-charged in the order of \$10 to \$30, not inconsiderable amounts.

A scanning error seems to occur in two ways.

1. for no apparent reason, an item will scan at a higher price.
2. more commonly, an item that was on sale the previous week and is no longer on sale will still show, on the shelf label, to be discounted. So when it is scanned, the price is much higher than what is shown on the shelf. I have been told this happens because the relevant staff member didn't show for work and so had not changed the shelf prices back to the regular, rather than sale price.

My husband operates businesses and has since 1999. It has been and still is difficult to recruit reliable workers whether they are paid wages, as contractors or on commission.

One member of the committee asked about whether complaints are made by consumers.

By way of background, living in a remote community involves many situations where complaints are necessary due to the remoteness (mail that doesn't arrive, couriers that don't deliver, materials paid for that doesn't get delivered to the barge by the merchant). But we residents have to pick our battles for complaints about problems on TI. In a small community where most people are known or related, complaining is not encouraged or even possible. It is not '*gud pasin*' – not 'good etiquette'.

Often, complaining achieves nothing anyway. I complained to a manager about being overcharged \$36 on fresh produce because the week's prices, that had been entered into the computer, had not been labelled on the shelves. This was in the afternoon and he confirmed that the overcharging had taken place since 8.30 that morning. His response, 'Make a complaint' but he was evasive and rude. I had to extract information to him. At no time did he volunteer the information. He is no longer the manager.

Suggestion:

1. IBIS to adopt the same policy as southern supermarkets – a scanning error results in the item/s being free.
2. Establish a system so that sale prices are automatically labelled on the shelves. If the relevant person doesn't show for work, the next in line will check.
3. Address the issue of staff not showing for work.
4. Privatise IBIS so it functions like other supermarkets and employ reliable staff.

FREIGHT

Mr Bowler outlined the prices of sale items for the week of fruit and vegetables.

I compared prices of three items on 30 March.

At Woolworths;

1. 1 kg of generic brand cheese was \$7.49 (IBIS \$16.79);
2. 2 litres of generic brand milk \$2.17 (IBIS no generic, regular \$4.29);
3. 1.12 kg of powdered milk \$5.99 (IBIS slightly less 1 kg \$12.79).

IBIS does not offer discounts for items purchased in bulk such as potatoes, onions, apples, oranges, where as supermarkets on the mainland do, even the independent supermarkets. My freight costs when I order from down south are consistently around the 15% mark. I cannot see how a freight subsidy could address the high prices if those high prices are the result of store operations and maintenance as Mr Bowler outlined?

The message to this community from health bodies/professionals is to 'eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables' but the majority of what is in IBIS is grown in south-east Queensland and isn't even able to be grown in the tropics so by the time it is freighted here, it is starting to spoil.

Since 30% of global carbon emissions are from growing, transporting, storing and packaging food, Islanders may consider they have a greater vested interest in growing their own food considering the impact of climate change here and the problems of packaging becoming landfill when there is not much land.

Many Europeans avoid the problems of sub-standard produce and high prices by buying from southern supermarkets. Islanders are still left in a disadvantageous position.

Mayor Stephen referred to the need for funding for community and backyard gardens. This has been attempted through the *Gadin Kai Kai* project run by Queensland Health of the mid-to late 90s for which my husband worked. The program folded a few years after its inception.

Gardens are incredibly hard work, more so in an environment of poor soil and the need to be built up. We have a dry season and our garden requires much water at this time. Will the Torres Shire Council forgo excess water rates for those people maintaining gardens? Excess water is costly and may justify continuing to buy from IBIS.

Suggestions:

1. Offer bulk discounts.
2. Offer, for example, those healthy Black and Gold products for sale at the Cairns prices plus freight so that people have the choice to buy one line of each item at a reasonable price through the cross-subsidisation Mr Bowler referred to.
3. Encourage people to cultivate backyard gardens and keep chooks by way of incentives (rather than the Torres Shire Council offering prizes for the Christmas lights competition which consumes non-renewable energy). There are people who can and do maintain lush gardens.
4. IBIS to make available spoiled produce for people with gardens.

STORE AIR CONDITIONING

It is common knowledge that the main store temperature is extremely cold and seems much colder than other airconditioned shops and offices. Could IBIS adopt Ergon Energy's 'Say yes to 10% less' campaign?

Could the saving be passed on to reduce the cost of healthy produce?