

BOARD OF GOVERNORS
OF THE
FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM

STATEMENT FOR THE PRESS

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The following summary of general business and financial conditions in the United States, based upon statistics for March and the first three weeks of April, will appear in the May issue of the Federal Reserve Bulletin and in the monthly reviews of the Federal Reserve banks.

In March and the first three weeks of April industrial activity continued at about the same rate as in January and February. Distribution of commodities to consumers showed less than the usual seasonal increase and wholesale commodity prices declined further.

Production

Volume of industrial production showed little change from February to March and the Board's index, which is adjusted for the number of working days and for usual seasonal variations, remained at 79 percent of the 1923-1925 average. In the steel industry, output of ingots averaged 33 percent of capacity in March and continued at about this level in the first three weeks of April. Shipments of finished steel in March, as in other recent months, were at a somewhat higher rate than output. Automobile production, which usually expands sharply at this time of the year, showed little change from the low level of January and February, and output of tires and plate glass likewise remained at a low rate. In the lumber and cement industries there were considerable increases

in output in March. At cotton and silk textile mills and shoe factories activity rose somewhat, while production at woolen mills declined following a rise in February. Declines were reported also for meat packing and sugar refining. At mines, where production decreased generally in February, output of bituminous coal and nonferrous metals continued to decline in March, while production of anthracite and crude petroleum increased somewhat.

Value of construction contracts awarded showed a considerable increase in March, according to figures of the F. W. Dodge Corporation. Awards for residential work, which had advanced moderately in February, increased sharply in March but were still 12 percent less than in March 1937. Contracts for other private work also increased in March, but remained considerably smaller than a year ago. The value of public projects showed an increase and was higher than last year.

Employment

Factory employment declined somewhat and payrolls showed little change from the middle of February to the middle of March, although increases are usual at this season. The number employed in the machinery industries decreased considerably further and at woolen mills there was also a substantial decline, while most other manufacturing industries showed moderate declines or little change. Employment on the railroads and in the public utilities declined somewhat further in March, while in other nonmanufacturing lines there was little change in the number employed.

Distribution

Sales at variety stores and by mail order houses increased seasonally in March, while sales at department stores showed less than the

usual rise. The Board's seasonally adjusted index of department store sales declined from 88 in February to 86 in March and figures for the first three weeks of April indicate some further decline. Freight-car loadings showed little change from February to March, although a rise is usual at this time of the year. Shipments of coal declined substantially and miscellaneous loadings increased by less than the usual seasonal amount.

Commodity prices

Wholesale commodity prices generally declined from the middle of March to the third week of April. There were further decreases in prices of a number of raw and semifinished industrial commodities, and prices of some leading agricultural products also declined, reflecting in part seasonal influences. In the middle of April prices of some industrial materials advanced slightly from the lows reached earlier in the month.

Bank credit

During March and the first three weeks of April, total loans at reporting member banks in 101 leading cities declined further, reflecting a substantial reduction in loans to brokers and dealers in securities and also declines in commercial loans. Holdings of investments showed little net change, declining in March and increasing in April.

As a part of the Government's program for encouragement of business recovery, the Board of Governors reduced reserve requirements of member banks by about \$750,000,000, effective April 16, and excess reserves correspondingly increased. As a part of the same program the

Treasury discontinued the inactive gold account and deposited about \$1,400,000,000 of gold certificates with the Federal Reserve banks. Additions to excess reserves from this source will occur as the Treasury draws upon these deposits to meet current expenditures and the retirement of Treasury bills.

Money rates and bond yields

Yields on Treasury bonds declined from a level of 2.50 percent in the first half of April to 2.32 percent on April 22. The average yield on 3-5 year Treasury notes declined to a new low of 0.81 percent, which compares with the previous low of 0.92 percent in December 1936. The rate on three-month Treasury bills declined to virtually a no-yield basis. Other short-term open-market money rates remained unchanged in the first three weeks of April.