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As marketers pressure producers to cut use of rBST, defensive strategies evolve **Dairymen prepared to protect their choices**

By SHERRY BUNTING
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SCHAEFFERTOWN, Pa. - Opinions without fact. Decision points without understanding. "We can scare consumers in a 30 second sound-bite, but we can't educate them in 30 seconds," said Dr. Terry Etherton, department head and distinguished professor of animal nutrition at Penn State University's department of dairy and animal science. "Processors and cooperatives need to stand in the light of public understanding with some accountability. The "rBST-free" labeling (and the push to get producers to sign papers) is nothing but smoke and mirrors."

Etherton spoke to a group of more than 100 dairy farmers from Lebanon, Berks, and northern Lancaster counties who came out to the fire hall here on Wednesday for a grassroots meeting. The meeting was aimed at preserving their right to choose safe, approved technologies in managing their dairy farms, and was organized by dairymen Dan Brandt and Tom Krall of Lebanon County and Nelson Martin of Berks County.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Dennis C Wolff came to "listen," but he also offered important comments on the issue. Area veterinarian Dr. Brian Reed also gave his perspective. In addition to dairy farmers, there were a half-dozen veterinarians in the audience, a representative of Land-O-Lakes, a representative of Clover Farms, and representatives of the PA Center for Dairy Excellence. Approximately 700

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More than 100 producers and industry representatives attended the local grassroots meeting to understand the value of technology to agriculture, preserve their choices in using safe, approved management tools for their dairies, and negotiate fair premiums for having to give up production efficiencies these technologies provide.

Dr. Terry Etherton, department head, Penn State University department of Dairy and Animal Science, told producers the rBST-free milk labeling issue is "smoke and mirrors."

Lebanon County dairyman Dan Brandt expresses his concern about potentially losing the right to choose safe, approved technologies on his farm and his frustration over marketing schemes that he believes are confusing consumers. He worked with fellow dairy farmers Tom Krall also of Lebanon County and Nelson Martin from Berks County to organize the meeting.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Dennis Wolff came to the meeting to listen, but he shared his concern, noting that all milk is healthy milk.

Dr. Brian Reed, DVM, of Agricultural Veterinarian Associates based in Denver, Pa., talked about the long-term implications of current trends in milk labeling.

Lebanon County dairyman Tom Krall was one of three farmers to organize the meeting. His chief concern is preserving choice as a producer and challenging milk bottlers and retailers to stop capitalizing on fear.



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invitations were sent out, and Martin, Krall and Brandt report receiving many phone calls from fellow dairy producers who wanted to be there.

“Consumers are getting confused with the extra labels,” said PA Ag Secretary Dennis Wolff. “They deserve a choice, and so do producers. But from the standpoint of safety, all milk is healthy milk. Our milk is a safe product. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is not in a position to say use rBST or not. The key word is: choice. I used rBST from day one of its approval to the last day that I milked cows. It was an important management tool on my dairy farm. What we oppose is the negative advertising or the selling of fear. If producers are asked to give up a production efficiency, and if that efficiency nets them \$3,000 or \$10,000 a year for their dairy farm... That’s a lot of money. That’s money for insurance premiums or groceries. I would hate to see a safe and approved management tool taken away.”

Wolff also referred to the recent *N.Y. Times* article entitled: “Which cows do you trust?” The article talked about the “middle label” in what is becoming a three-tiered milk marketing system at the retail level.

The article quoted milk prices at a Safeway store near Seattle, Washington: \$1.69 per half-gallon of milk, \$3.69 per half-gallon of Horizon organic milk, and “priced neatly in-between at \$2.79 per half-gallon was the Darigold milk labeled as ‘coming from cows not treated with the growth hormone rBST*.’ The asterisk referred to tiny letters near the bottom of the carton indicating that the FDA says there is no difference between the milk from treated and untreated cows.”

“Do the math,” said Wolff. “Those are half-gallon prices so the difference is \$2.20 per gallon (between milk and rBST-free milk). There are 11 gallons in a hundredweight of milk, so that’s \$24/cwt premium (at the retail level). If guys are getting \$13 for their milk — where is the rest of the \$37?”

It is no wonder that retail giants like Wal-Mart and Dean Foods and others want to cash-in on this seductive “middle.” They can do it quickly without waiting for farms to go through costly transitions to certified organic.

They can do it now by telling cooperatives to get the signed paperwork and away they go. They can do it and offer the consumer essentially the same milk product that seems different, seems organic, for \$2 per gallon less than certified organic.

Meanwhile, where does their profit go? And how much profit does the dairy farm give up?

Everyone who spoke at the meeting noted that this is a move that capitalizes on fear. Fear that is not based on sound science. As several dairymen said during the meeting — each in their own way — this is dishonest to the consumer and to the producer.

“All dairy farmers need to challenge the milk bottlers and retailers that create milk labels and/or advertisements on controversial products such as rBST,” said dairyman Tom Krall. “Milk labeling and advertising should clear-up fears, not stir-up fears; eliminate confusion, not create confusion; promote dairy, not demote dairy. Our promotion dollars are lost if dairymen allow retailers and bottlers to cannibalize the final products that the customers purchase.”

“The public doesn’t have a clue about basic biology,” Etherton stated. “In surveys, only 49% of consumers have ever heard about traditional cross-breeding and only 28% believed they had ever eaten a crossbred fruit or vegetable. We’ve been doing this for more than a hundred years. Who wants to go back to 1850 to St. Louis and hop in the wagon to head out west? The issue is here and it must be confronted. The ‘rBST-free’ milk labeling issue is an attempt to manipulate the margin.”

Etherton noted that the food retail sector is pushing for an “organic light” offering in the dairy case. In other words: this midway product between milk and organic milk. This is a marketing ploy, not a consumer-driven move, he said, explaining that DMS calls it a convergence of market share, indicating that the vast majority of New England milk will be eligible for rBST-free labeling.

“It may be that farms will be offered a transient premium for signing these agreements,” said Etherton. “Some have been told they will be charged 65 cents (per cwt) if they use rBST. Those premiums (or surcharges) will eventually fade away and the

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producer will be back in the crack.”

Dr. Etherton has been involved in discovery research for nearly his entire professional career, including the study of somatotropins - both swine and bovine - since 1979. He authored a column in *Feedstuffs* October 9 in response to a September *Boston Globe* article about the decision by H.P. Hood and Dean Foods to switch New England milk processing plants to rBST-free milk. In this article, he concludes with the statement: “What is the lesson here? Unfortunately, it is there are those who seek to profit from lies that others tell twice — once to the world and once to themselves.”

The dairy farmers who organized Wednesday’s meeting report they had received letters from their cooperatives indicating they would be asked to sign papers agreeing not to use rBST. Etherton told farmers they are being misled to believe consumers are driving this move.

“In reality, there is only a very, very small fraction of consumers who have any public concern about this if they are surveyed appropriately,” Etherton explained. “Food safety is top-of-mind for consumers but less than 0.5% of consumers identify biotechnology as the concern. Yet Dean Foods, H.P. Hood and others are saying this is what consumers want. Somebody is getting manipulated and you are sitting with the crowd that is getting manipulated.”

Etherton also cited surveys showing that 76% of

consumers are happy with their food labels. They don’t want more information. They see the rBST-free label and wonder what is rBST? “They don’t know what it is, and so they think of things like steroids and athletes,” he explained.

“Each one of us has thousands of hormones floating around in our bloodstream for our very survival. Recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST) is not orally active. It is digested as a protein like any other protein. It is not absorbed into the bloodstream intact -- and even if it were -- the human somatotropin receptor cells would not accept a non-primate somatotropin. There is no way on this green earth for rBST to have a biological effect on a human.”

The issue is not limited to rBST. Market Probe in Milwaukee recently sent surveys to dairy producers asking them at what premium would they give up antibiotics and timed artificial insemination.

“How many of you got these surveys in the mail?” asked Etherton, to which about half the attendees raised their hands. “We’re still trying to find out who prompted this survey, but it is an indication of what could be next. This is a call to action. The issue is here, and it must be confronted. If we are passive and watch the boat sail down the river, negative consequences will play out, which will have an effect on the future viability of animal agriculture, the environment, future innovation, our products and our producers. A citizen-based effort is what is needed. We have a very robust food production system, but it is also very fragile.” ■