

Dairymen organize to protect technologies

Big concern over future independence, progress in animal health and efficiency

By **SHERRY BUNTING**
Special for *Farmshine*

SCHAEFFERSTOWN, Pa. - "There are very important things at stake," said dairy practitioner Dr. Brian Reed of Agricultural Veterinarian Associates based in Denver, Pa. "Producers have a choice to use or not use technologies that are available. That's what I'm here to talk about: not to cause conflict but to find common ground. I'm not here to argue the merits of rBST. That was done 12 to 15 years ago during the FDA approval process and in the day-to-day decisions on individual dairy farms. I'm here to reaffirm that all milk is safe, nutritious and wholesome."

Reed was one of several speakers who discussed the long-term implications of "rBST-free" milk labeling during a grassroots meeting here last Wednesday (October 25). The meeting was organized by dairymen Dan Brandt and Tom Krall of Lebanon County and Nelson Martin of Berks County and attended by more than 100 people.

"In August, some of us received letters from processors and cooperatives looking for farmers to sign papers not to use rBST," said Brandt who was first at the podium. "The biggest thing for me is preserving the right to use rBST — and other safe and approved technologies — as a management tool on my dairy farm. It has been FDA-approved for 13 years. It is the most USDA and FDA tested product. The content and composition of the milk is the same. And yet the processor can put an extra label on 'rBST-free' milk and charge a 40% markup to the consumer, even though there is no difference between that milk product and my milk product."

(Apparently they can also do this without returning much if any of the retail milk premium to the farmers who are being asked/told to give up the management tool.)

Brandt and other speakers were quick to point out

that this is an issue of trust for consumers, especially when they realize the dairy farmer is not the one benefiting from the retail mark-up.

"Whether or not dairy producers choose to use rBST, as a management tool is an individual farm management decision," he said. "But the long-term concern is an issue for all dairymen: Where does it stop? If it's rBST today, what will we be told to give up tomorrow?"

"We (dairy farmers) sent out 700 invitations and paid for the fire hall rental and refreshments out of our own pockets because we are concerned about the threat to our choice and independence as dairymen," said Martin during an interview at the conclusion of the meeting. "The rBST-free labeling issue is dishonest to consumers and to producers."

Producer written comments were also provided in the information/response packets that were distributed during the meeting and to dairymen who called-in but could not attend. Martin summed up his concern this way:

"...It is bad for consumers, who will be charged a premium for a product they are led to believe is better than other milk. It is bad for the milk industry as a whole because it creates an impression that only certain kinds of milk are safe. And most of all, it is terrible for dairymen because we are losing control of our farms, being told to give up the choice of how we run our operations and being coerced into losing a completely safe and legal tool that makes us more efficient and profitable."

All speakers pointed out that retailers and processors are attempting to differentiate their product by offering a product in the middle between milk and organic milk. The aim is to capture the small fraction of consumers paying big prices for organic milk by offering something cheaper than organic, but more expensive than conventional milk.

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The problem is that the differentiated milk is not different - although the higher price and the extra label pertaining to rBST gives the impression that this milk-in-the-middle is better, safer, and “kinda” organic.

In reality, the term “rBST-free” is a misnomer because cows themselves produce the same growth hormone naturally. FDA states that there is no difference between the milk produced from cows that are treated or not treated with the FDA-approved and production boosting rBST growth hormone (marketed under the trade name Posilac by Monsanto).

The method being used by processors for securing the rBST-related middle label in the retail case is faster and simpler than for organic labeling: 1) tell dairy farmers to sign agreements not to use FDA-approved rBST; 2) separate the milk by designating plants as “rBST-free” only; 3) slap on an extra label stating the milk is produced by cows not receiving rBST; 4) place the required fine print at the bottom of the carton acknowledging “the FDA says there is no difference between the milk from treated and untreated cows”; 5) charge consumers \$1 to \$2 more per gallon which translates to \$11.60 to \$23.20 more per hundredweight. 6) Voila: instant increase in profit margin (for processors and retailers, that is).

The dairy farmers who organized the meeting set forth the purpose of exploring several key issues:

- 1) the cost/return for giving up a production tool for less than its added efficiency;
- 2) the impact of misleading milk labels and advertisements creating confusion for consumers and eroding consumer confidence in milk;
- 3) at what level does consumer demand really exist for this product or is it a marketing campaign for processor and retailer margin - beyond the farm gate?
- 4) the consequences of differentiating this product in the marketplace through “perception” when there is no “real” difference in the product;
- 5) if rBST is the tool on the chopping block today, what will it be tomorrow?
- 6) what is the value of technology in agriculture and how will this issue affect future research and innovation?

“We’re seeing a splintering of the dairy case today... as retailers and processors attempt to differentiate their product,” said Reed, citing surveys showing that 47% of store personnel interviewed believe these differentiated claims mean the milk is healthier and more nutritious. “That’s scary to me. When the consumer comes to the supermarket, who do they see? These are the people answering consumer questions about the impressions given by the labels.”

Reed also cited a recent article in the farm press stating that cooperatives are ‘between a rock and a hard place’ with retail pressure on one side and dairy farmers on the other. “I want them to be there,” he said. “Not between a rock and a sponge. The issue of choice is a dairyman’s issue. You also have to stand up for where you are.”

Dr. Terry Etherton, distinguished professor of animal nutrition and department head, Penn State University department of dairy and animal science also addressed the divide between the reality of sound science and the perception of implied labeling.

“There is a significant element of deception in differentiating whether milk is produced using rBST or not,” he said. “The media reports talk to some consumers, some farmers, but where is the science? If you look at it, there are anti-science messages everywhere in the media. We need truth in advertising, sound science, and an understanding of the realities that are coming into play.”

Etherton outlined this reality check. “What is the hidden cost of stopping technology and innovation?” he asked. “Biotechnology in agriculture and medicine are diverse and highly regulated enterprises. They are subject to a robust review process in the U.S. A lot of effort and attention is paid to evaluating products for safety and efficacy. Universities partner with private industry to move society ahead. Yet the consumer’s perception of the value of technology depends upon how we frame the question. This process of discovery has an impact on the farm level and on our ability to sustain food production for the growing population.”

Etherton touched on the important advancements over the past 30 years that have lowered the use of chemicals, increased U.S. food production, improved

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production efficiencies at the farm level, conserved the use of resources for the good of the environment, and resulted in more nutritious food products. He also pointed out that in order to feed the world's population, the world will need to produce approximately the same amount of food within the next 40 years that it has produced in all of history combined - and do this without sacrificing the environment.

"My question is, how are we going to deal with this reality?" said Etherton. "Technologies can't be developed and changed overnight. There is a huge cost in research and development and 10 to 15 years of investment involved in the testing and approval process. There needs to be a market return at the end of it all, for this process of discovery to continue."

From his perspective as a local dairy practitioner for more than 19 years, Dr. Reed is also concerned about the future of animal health and production efficiency.

"The potential long term impact is the slowing down of research into new technologies to improve our industry," he said. "The approval process through FDA is in-depth and extremely costly. What companies are going to do all of this, only to have a protest group come along and nix it. This puts a stranglehold on future research and innovation and increases your cost of production by taking away profitable technologies without a correlating increase in your milk check."

Reed cited the animal rights activist agenda as the issue that underlies the argument: chipping away at the industry, creating dissention among producers, and eroding consumer confidence in the quest to bring down animal agriculture. "We have a great industry that we should all be proud of," he said. "Fighting among ourselves will only tear it down."

"The issue is here and it must be confronted," Etherton added. "This is a wake-up call for the dairy industry."

One producer attending the meeting posed the concept of positive extra labels for milk that would highlight the things dairy farmers do on a daily basis that consumers really care about. For example: animal health and husbandry, disease prevention and food

safety, milk quality (SCC and components), and environmental stewardship.

On milk quality issues, one dairy producer noted that premiums paid by processors and cooperatives for low somatic cell count are deteriorating -- being reduced and the thresholds tightened-up. He said that producers need to develop the state-of-mind that quality is important and be paid a better premium for achieving SCC goals that increase the shelf life of milk.

One dairy producer suggested that if everyone gave up rBST, less milk would be produced, and milk prices would then increase. Another producer replied that this increase in milk price would be temporary, noting that milk would be produced to fill the void through outside investment in large operations in other parts of the country — not family farms here in the Northeast.

Several producers who attended the meeting, indicated that having the freedom to choose how they manage their dairies and having the access to production efficiencies that fit these individual management choices, is crucial for their survival and for the survival of family dairy farms here.

Packets were distributed including materials for sending letters to retailers, processors, cooperative leadership and the media. Meeting organizers said their purpose is to raise awareness of what is at stake, examine the short and long-term consequences, and provide a call-to-action for dairy producers to:

- 1) promote unity among producers to maintain strength and freedom;
- 2) urge producers to contact their cooperative leadership to voice concerns and remind them of their responsibilities to protect the interests of dairymen;
- 3) urge action to stop labels and marketing campaigns from creating negative impressions about the safety and quality of milk;
- 4) encourage producers not to sign documents that lock-in a specified time frame.
- 5) require processors to link retail premiums back to farmers as compensation for requiring shippers to sign agreements not to use rBST.

For an information packet, readers may contact: Nelson Martin at 717-821-0655, Dan Brandt at 717-821-1238 (email brandtfive@comcast.net), or Tom Krall at 717-274-5891 (email: krallfarm@verizon.net) ■