rbST FREE MILK AND THE LARGER ISSUE OF ORGANIC FARMING

The following article addresses an issue facing dairy farming throughout the US, recent efforts by some milk processors or procurers to ask dairy producers to sign statements that they will not use rbST (recombinant bovine somatotropin). The article was taken directly from Feedstuffs magazine, the issue of November 27, 2006.

Involvement of dairy veterinarians in this debate is not yet clear. Most (94%) dairy producers consider their veterinarian as the single most trusted advisor on herd health and health management practices. Dairy veterinarians are knowledgeable on issues of animal and public health, yet may be comparative bystanders as this issue plays out among milk processors, other food companies, dairy producers, and consumers. The purpose of this column and of Utah State University is not to endorse one side or the other of this debate, but to provide information regarding what may become one of the most important issues facing the dairy industry as well as agriculture as a whole.

The reprinted article begins below:

‘CHOICE’ WARRANTS CALL TO ACTION

Concerns about recent rbST-free milk marketing moves by processors and cooperatives prompted several Pennsylvania dairy farmers to take action.

Dan Barndt, Tom Krall and Nelson Martin recently organized a grassroots meeting and call-to-action that attracted more than 100 Pennsylvania dairy farmers from Lebanon, Berks and northern Lancaster counties to discuss the short and long-term consequences of removing recombinant bovine somatotropin (rbST) as a technology choice.

The idea for the meeting was developed after producers in the region began receiving letters about cooperatives going rbST free at the processors’ request.

At the meeting was Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Dennis C. Wolff, who came mostly to listen but also shared his concerns.

“Consumers are getting confused with the extra labels,” Wolff said. “The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is not in a position to say use rbST or not. The key word is ‘choice.’ 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,” he added. “What we oppose is the negative advertising or the selling of fear. All milk is healthy milk. Our milk is a safe product.”

Dr. Terry Etherton, distinguished professor of animal nutrition and department head of the Penn State University department of dairy and animal science, presented the realities of science and his assessment of the rbST-free labeling issue.

Etherton said, “There is a significant element of deception in differentiating whether milk is produced using rbST or not. Processors and cooperatives need to stand in the light of public understanding with some accountability.

“Each one of us has thousands of hormones floating around in our bloodstream for our very survival,” he noted. “(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 (growth) 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 rbST-free labeling (and the push to get producers to sign papers) is nothing but smoke and mirrors. It is an attempt to manipulate the margin. It may be that farms will be offered a transient premium for signing these agreements. These premiums will eventually fade away, and the producer will be back in the crack,” Etherton added.

“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,” he emphasized.

Etherton said, “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.”

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 the Oct. 9 Feedstuffs in response to a September Boston Globe article about the decision H.P. Hood and Dean Foods made to switch New England milk processing plants to rbST-free milk. (Hear Etherton talk about the safety of rbST on www.FeedstuffsFoodLink.com).

Dr. Brian Reed of Agricultural Veterinarian Associates based in Denver, Pa., talked about the long-term implications of current trends in milk labeling. He has been a dairy practitioner in the area for more than 19 years.

Noting that the Food & Drug Administration already debated the merits of rbST 12-15 years ago during its approval process, Reed said, “There are very important things at stake. Producers have a choice to use or not use technologies that are available.”

He pointed out, “We’re seeing a splintering of the dairy case today... as retailers and processors attempt to differentiate their product. A recent article noted 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, not between a rock and a sponge. The issue of choice is a dairyman’s issue, and you also have to stand up for where you are.

“We have a great industry that we should all be proud of,” Reed added. “Fighting among ourselves will only tear down the industry. The consequences erode consumer confidence in our milk product and put a stranglehold on future research and innovation. This increases your cost of production by taking away profitable technologies without a correlating increase in your milk check. What will be next?”

Dan Brandt, a Lebanon County dairy farmer, said, “In August, some of us received letters from processors and cooperatives looking for farmers to sign papers not to use rbST. 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.”

He explained that rbST “has been FDA approved for 13 years. It is the most (U.S. Department of Agriculture) and FDA tested product. The content and composition of the milk is the same. 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. This is an issue of trust for consumers, especially when they realize the dairy farmer is not the one benefiting from the retail markup. “Whether or not dairy producers choose to use rbST as a management tool is an individual farm management decision, 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?” Brandt concluded.

Lebanon County dairy farmer Tom Krall said, “All dairy farmers need to challenge the milk bottlers and retailers that create milk labels and/or advertisements on controversial products such as rbST. 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.”

Nelson Martin, a Berks County dairy farmer, provided written comments in the information/response packets stating that the label “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. 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.”

One producer attending the meeting said she wants extra labels to highlight the things dairy farmers do on a daily basis that consumers really care about, i.e., animal health and husbandry, disease prevention and food safety, milk quality (somatic cell counts and components) and environmental stewardship.

On milk quality issues, one dairy producer noted that premiums paid by processors and cooperatives for a low somatic cell count are deteriorating (being reduced, with thresholds tightening up). He said producers need to develop the state of mind that quality is important and be paid a better premium for achieving 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 could then increase. Another producer replied that this higher 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 through family farms 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 area family dairy farms.

Feedstuffs, November 27, 2006, p 8 & 12

(Reprinted article ends here)


There are many interesting links to information under the heading “Bovine Somatotropin” on this site. Following some of the links leads to many other sites as well. I read or watched a number of them. There is an attempt to show at least two “sides” of the issues of rbST use and of the larger issue of organic farming. The site has 12 audio or audio/video presentations and another 12 printed articles on rbST. Most of the audio or audio/video presentations are just a few minutes long. The information is presented under the headings, The Science, Industry’s View, and Counterpoint. Watching the presentations, I found them reasonably balanced, not usually overly emotional, and generally interesting. It is apparent that many of the biggest companies in agriculture and in direct sale of food and prepared food and beverages in the world are increasingly asking food producers for rbST free milk.

What is also clear is that there is little debate, and certainly no scientific evidence to the contrary was presented, that milk from cows administered rbST is safe for human consumption and is not detrimental to the health of cows. Since its approval nearly 13 years ago in early 1994, following approximately 800 studies before approval, there have been 1245 reviewed publications in scientific journals regarding bovine somatotropin. No accepted or conclusive evidence of negative impact on cattle or human health has been presented.

**Does this debate affect the image of milk produced from rbST treated cows?**

An aspect of considerable concern within the dairy industry is whether recent processor demands for rbST milk are tarnishing the image of all milk, implying that milk from cows administered recombinant growth hormone is unsafe, or less safe. One source quoted extensively in different stories and links to the website is Dr. Terry Etherton, Professor of Animal Nutrition from Penn State University (he was also quoted in the above article). Dr. Etherton is quoted as saying that he finds it “incredulous that there are those in the dairy industry who are actively undermining the HUGE (sic) investment that has been made with checkoff funds by differentiating the same milk into multiple product niches, and touting some while vilifying another”.

The Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania and the Northeast Dairy Producers Association have released a joint statement, “- - (we) have two concerns about this latest move within the dairy industry. One is that to produce this niche product a dairy producer is required to stop using a profitable and scientifically approved technology. And the producer has no guaranteed compensation for the loss of income associated with this loss of technology. Second, as consumers’ interest in farm production practices increases, we producers have a responsibility to provide accurate information about the care taken to produce the
products we sell. Regardless of how our products are labeled in the marketplace, we need to ensure that the customer has confidence in the safety and quality of all our products.”

Many of the articles and videos address this issue. The dairy industry, other livestock industries, or other food producing industries face choices of whether with the best of intentions, including “giving the consumer what they want”, we may produce unintended consequences. If we imply that two products with some differences in production methods, but both considered by overwhelming scientific evidence to be equally safe for human and animal health, may actually differ in safety or wholesomeness for the consumer, there may be very negative implications in the future.

**How much more will consumers pay for milk labeled as rbST free, and how much is passed on to dairy producers?**

One of the links on the site goes to an article by Bruce Mohl of the Boston Globe, originally published Sept. 25, 2006. Several specific examples from Boston-area grocery stores are cited. Most milk labeled with stickers saying that it came from producers who pledged not to use artificial growth hormones was sold for $.40 to $.70 more per gallon than milk with no such claims. An accompanying article by dairy producer John Vrieze quotes the New York Times as saying that a premium paid to dairy producers for rbST free milk is $.05/gallon. (This would equate to $.58/cwt of fluid milk, which is larger than any premium offered to producers pledging rbST free milk that I have heard of to date; there may be some proposed premiums in development that I am unaware of).

The article also states that some major milk processors “acknowledge the milks (with or without rbST administered to cows) are chemically indistinguishable”. One question that many of the articles ask is, what is really driving the interest in pledges of more rbST free milk? There is evidence presented that the vast majority of consumers do not see it as a food safety issue.

**Is the request by some processors for rbST milk influenced by the demand for organically produced milk?**

Some of the linked articles suggest that processors may be reacting to the steady increase in demand, and accompanying higher prices, paid for organic milk. The processors, it is suggested, would like to differentiate milk labeled free of rbST as more healthy or wholesome than other milk, and thus receive some of the price difference that consumers have demonstrated they will pay for organic foods.

An article I found in a separate search by Ben Arnoldy of the Christian Science Monitor was originally published Oct. 17, 2006. It is titled, “A New Milk Choice – Kinda Organic”. Chris Galen of the National Milk Producers Federation is quoted as saying, “Everyone recognizes that there’s a lot of demand for organic now and in all foods, not just dairy. Retailers (want) a product that can compete”. Mr. Arnoldy himself writes, “Organic milk requires different cow feeds, among other things, that sharply raise the price. Cutting out growth hormones is a cheap step toward organic, but it’s not organic. - - Processors say this new product addresses (consumer) concerns, but many farmers and scientists argue that companies are simply bottling fear for profit.”

In defense of some milk processors, Ms. Lynne Bohan, spokeswoman for HP Hood, is quoted, “We don’t believe there is a difference in the milk - - but more consumers are asking us to do that, so we knew we needed to do something”.

There are some very interesting links regarding the growth of, and the debate about the long-term effects of organic food production:

The same website, [www.FeedstuffsFoodlink.com](http://www.FeedstuffsFoodlink.com), again leads to information under the heading, “Organic Foods”. There are 18 audio or audio/video presentations and another 7 printed articles regarding organic food production. Most of the audio or audio/video presentations are just a few minutes long. The information is presented under the headings, The Science, and Industry’s View (this section does not have a Counterpoint heading, but still attempts to present at least two sides of those critical of and those in favor of organic farming).

**Organic farming continues to grow steadily each year**

Organic food production has grown between 15% and 21% each year from 1998 – 2005. The
number of organic producers has grown 12% per year, according to an article by Juan S. Velez of Aurora Organic Dairy, Proceedings of the 5th Annual Arizona Dairy Production Conference. Companies that now own at least one line of organically produced foods include dozens with the most recognizable names, including Coca-Cola, Pepsi, General Mills, Kellogg, Kraft, and Tyson. Many of these companies have acquired organic brands with names such as Muir Glen, Odwalla, Casbah, Kashi, Mountain Sun, and After the Fall.

One of the videos is a talk by Mark Kastel, a farmer who co-founded the Cornucopia Institute after years in other agricultural occupations, including lobbying. He states that there are 3,000 farmer’s markets in the US now. He comments that many organic farmers are true committed believers to organic farming, both for family and financial reasons. “Get big, get out, or go organic”, are the three choices facing farmers today, he says. He states that virtually all of the growth in demand for farm products in the US is for organic foods, which is agreed upon by other sources. Yet he also says that organic farming is not for everyone, and is not without costs and challenges. He also acknowledges that organic farming produces less food per animal, less food per farm than conventional farming methods. Mr. Kastel also comments on large corporations and increasingly larger farms, including large dairy farms, adopting organic production methods, and says that this is not what the public thinks they are supporting when buying organic foods. The public thinks they are supporting small family farms when buying organic, he asserts. He specifically mentions, “an 8,000 cow farm out in Idaho” in his discussion of large organic farms. I found his talk quite interesting. It is likely to offend larger producers who are now producing organic milk.

Organic dairy farming – what is the future?

This complex a subject cannot be addressed in the remaining space in this publication. However, the considerable resources on this website address at least 3 key issues:

1. While most organic milk prices paid at the farm are at present between $24.00 and $27.00/cwt, there is 15-25% less milk production per cow (compared with conventional herds not using rbST), organic feeds are expensive, and there are less treatment options for diseases of cattle. Most organic production “approved” remedies for disease have not been adequately scientifically evaluated for effectiveness. For these and many other reasons, the cost of organic production is higher.

2. Whether organically produced food is truly safer or more wholesome than conventionally produced food has not been demonstrated. This includes the fact that what defines “organic” milk is far from universally agreed upon, as well as the fact that no conclusive health benefits have been shown.

3. It is asserted that if all food were produced using organic methods, it would take 3 times as much land to feed society as if conventional methods are used. Even if this estimate is not precise, it is acknowledged that organic methods feed fewer people per unit of land or animals. At some point in the future, with continued population growth and loss of agricultural land to urban expansion, society, or most of it, may not be able to afford organic food production. However, this trend is not strong at present.

Consequences for food production in the future?

The most affluent society in history, with the lowest percentage of income spent on food, can afford to spend money on production methods that are universally acknowledged to provide food in ways that are less efficient per unit of land or animals. At present the two most visible choices in the dairy industry are rbST-free labeled and organic milk. It is wonderful to have these choices in our society, and for dairy producers and others to receive higher prices for commodities (hopefully with greater profitability as well). Individual producers cannot be blamed for considering production methods that they enjoy that also can result in milk prices of over $25.00/cwt. However, this includes economic incentives or pressures for dairy producers and other food producers to “choose” not to use certain production methods including fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics and hormones. Yet, if these alternative methods are not demonstrably associated with health benefits for
humans (animal health will inevitably be less valued with increased population pressure on the food supply), economics and basic survival will someday dictate a return to the most efficient food production methods possible. Increased efficiency and improved health of the food supply have been the hallmark of farming in the developed countries over approximately the last century. Those trends cannot be effectively reversed, unless strong trends in population growth, farm land availability, and economics are also reversed.

However, faith in safety of all foods, including dairy products, may be seriously weakened if consumers have been led (or simply encouraged) to believe that conventional production methods such as use of rbST are detrimental to human health.

The extensive commentary that can be found on this issue is notably lacking that from veterinary medicine. As major advisors on animal and public health, perhaps our profession needs more organized discussion on this matter. I am greatly interested in the opinion of our readers regarding the choices facing the dairy industry.

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