

Pennsylvania's Milk Cover-Up – and Reconsideration

By Samuel Fromartz

In a controversial decision, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture announced in October it would severely restrict the wording on milk labels – including those from organic milk processors. The department told 19 dairies that they could not use language such as "Our farmers' pledge: no artificial growth hormones," or "From cows not treated with the growth hormone rBST," starting January 1, 2008.

This decision marked the first time that a state had ignored federal labeling guidelines and forced a far more restrictive standard on its dairy producers.

It blocked the rights of organic processors to describe production practices mandated by law. It undermined processors in the conventional market selling milk produced without artificial hormones. And it undercut a clear trend in recent years: the desire by consumers to seek out milk produced without synthetic growth hormones.

But an 11th hour protest from consumer groups, farmers and dairy processors and associations put the decision on hold for at least a month.

Surveys clearly show consumers desire more transparency — not less — on milk labels. Lake Research Partners found 80 percent of consumers supported the labeling of rBGH-free milk products. The Natural Marketing Institute found that 53 percent of shoppers look for dairy products free of artificial hormones. And Opinion Research found 81 percent would prefer to buy dairy products derived from cows that do not receive synthetic hormones, assuming little or no pricing difference.

So why is Pennsylvania swimming against the tide? Pennsylvania Agriculture Secretary Dennis Wolff said the action was promoted by concerns among a panel of "consumer groups," farmers and processors, though the action was entirely in line with the policy position of Monsanto, which makes synthetic bovine growth hormone (rBGH or rBST). Although the Food and Drug Administration approved rBGH in 1993, it has been banned in the European Union, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. It is also banned in organic systems. Pennsylvania is the fourth largest dairy state, with an estimated 560,000 cows, according to figures cited on Voices of Central Pennsylvania, a web site. An estimated 30 percent, or 168,000 cows, are injected with Monsanto's synthetic growth hormone, Posilac.

Wolff argued that since the synthetic bovine growth hormones are indistinguishable from naturally occurring hormones and cannot be detected in milk, a label that

indicates their absence would be impossible to verify. All milk is also tested to be free of antibiotics, so there's no reason to label their absence either.

But Pennsylvania's action also limited statements about production practices, making it impossible for consumers to identify producers who follow a regime they agree with. Based on the ruling, a farmer cannot say on a Pennsylvania milk label, "I don't use rBGH or antibiotics on my farm" – even though this statement may be factually correct.

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On organic farms, such production claims can be verified through the yearly visits by inspectors. Conventional milk producers can also issue legal affidavits about their practices under penalty of fraud. But Pennsylvania closed off this avenue by saying that such affidavits were now unacceptable as a basis for

label claims.

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This debate isn't new, but it has gained steam as companies, responding to consumer demand, sought out milk produced without rBGH and crimped Monsanto's market for the drug. Dean Foods, the largest milk processor in the nation, has switched some plants to rBGH free milk production. Starbucks, Safeway, and Kroger are going that way too; Chipotle Mexican Grill had announced plans to convert its entire cheese supply by the end of the year. Many natural food stores have long sold milk produced without synthetic hormones.

By stating they avoid milk produced with rBGH, these companies are following federal directives on the matter. As early as 1994, after the Food and Drug Administration approved Monsanto's synthetic growth hormone, the FDA allowed production claims, such as "from cows not treated with rBST" – precisely the wording used by many organic dairy processors.

For the past several years, Monsanto has sought to limit these absence claims arguing they disparage com-

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peting milk. In 2003, Monsanto sued Oakhurst Dairy in Maine over a label statement that read, "Our farmers' pledge: no artificial growth hormones." The suit was settled out of court, when Oakhurst added the language: "FDA states: No significant difference in milk from cows treated with artificial growth hormone."

Last year, Monsanto appealed to the FDA to review the approved label wording for rBGH and also sought action from the Federal Trade Commission regarding advertising of rBGH free milk.

The FDA declined to act, noting that it would only intervene in cases where fraudulent claims – as opposed to product descriptions – were made on the milk label. In dismissing Monsanto's complaint, the FTC also found no instance where a national company made false claims about rBST.

Having failed in the federal arena, it now appears Monsanto is lobbying state governments to cover up the labels and reduce consumer choice. Pennsylvania was the first to fall, but in a particularly encouraging development, many consumer groups joined with dairy processors objecting to the action. Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture also initiated a letter writing campaign to the governor, who was caught off-guard by the Agriculture Commissioner's decision.

The governor put on the brakes in December, reconvening a committee to consider the matter. Any action of label would be delayed for at least another month. But if Pennsylvania decides to go forward in February – and other states follow suit - a farmer's right to free speech and consumer's right to choice will be dealt a blow. Expect more news on letter writing campaigns and possible law suits ahead.

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The AgroFuels Craze

By John Kinsman, Adapted from the June 2007 magazine "GRAIN" (www.grain.org)

What is behind the rapid expansion of biofuels across much of the globe? In the process of gathering material from colleagues and social movements from around the world, the editors of GRAIN discovered that the stampede into biofuels is causing enormous environmental and social damage, much more than they realized earlier. Precious ecosystems are being destroyed and hundreds of thousands of indigenous and peasant communities as well as family farmers are being thrown off their land. Many of us believe that the prefix bio, which comes from the Greek word for "life", is entirely inappropriate for such anti-life devastation. So, following the lead of non-governmental organizations and social movements in Latin America, they will not be talking about biofuels and green energy. Agrofuels is a much better term to express what is really happening: agribusiness producing fuel from plants to sustain a wasteful destructive global economy.

The agrofuels lobby and the Inter-American Development Bank are targeting several hundred million hectares of land for agrofuels production in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Africa. We are talking about expropriation on an unprecedented scale. With millions of people hungry and starving in these countries, diverting land away from food production is a crime of horrifying proportions.

We must all be taking a closer look at the way corporations are using this stampede into agrofuels to extend their takeover of world farming. We are experiencing a veritable frenzy of investment as companies from different sectors leap on the bandwagon. An unparalleled process of mergers, takeovers, and alliances is tightening the grip of a relatively small group of huge interlinked agri-industrial groups. Many analysts believe that the market is heading for a crisis of over production. Once the bubble has burst, only the most powerful groups will remain, thus furthering the process of concentration.

The conclusion is pretty much the same around the world: the push for agrofuels amounts to nothing less than the reintroduction and reinforcement of the old colonial plantation economy, redesigned to function under the rules of the modern neoliberal globalized world. Recent studies show that the slave-like working life of sugar cane workers in Brazil is 10 to 12 years; the same as overworked slaves during the slave era in the United States.

One of the main causes of global warming is agro-industrial farming itself, and the global food system

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