

Consumer and Milk Marketing Concerns Because of BST Produced Milk

Barbara Keating-EDH,
President, Consumer Alert,
Modesto, CA 95354

I am president of Consumer Alert (CA), a nationwide membership organization for consumers that advances free markets and competitive enterprise.

In addition, CA, as an education foundation, focuses on the advancement of safe technology and the dissemination of accurate scientific data enabling consumers to evaluate risks in their lives.

Those of us involved in the consumer alert organization are convinced that among the primary interests of American consumers are freedom from personal coercion, prudent government tax and spend policies, enhancement of competitive enterprise, the availability of foreign goods and accurate risk data so that individuals can make informed choices.

We know that consumers are not well served by negative attitudes nor by restricted commerce. They are best served by scientific and technological progress and the healthy national economy that accompanies these developments.

It is obvious to us that consumers are not served by exaggerated fear of the unknown nor by the advancement of notions not held valid by the majority of the scientific community. Indeed, consumers pay dearly for these misguided forays.

Fear today is widespread, even popular. Fear of the unknown, fear that feeds on exaggeration, wacko science and media hype. And let us not ignore the fact that some engage in selling fear for profit. Honestly, there is financial gain in selling fear that rivals the rewards of producing wholesome food and safe products.

I share with you the rationale advanced by one such organization that calls itself "The Farm Animal Reform Movement," The group's literature reads-- "Next to nuclear weapons, the meat industry and its associates in animal agriculture pose the greatest threat to the quality of life on this planet. But, there's one important difference, a nuclear war may be deferred, perhaps indefinitely, whereas the holocaust of animal agriculture goes on every minute of every day of every year. The four horsemen of this latter day apocalypse are: animal suffering, diet induced chronic disease, world hunger and devastation of natural resources."

This Washington DC based organization then launches into charges of cruelty in the slaughter of 20 million cows, calves, sheep, pigs, chickens and turkeys.

Outraged over butchering for profit, the writers point out that slaughter provides relief for the tortured farm animals who are subjected to force feeding, genetic manipulation, artificial insemination, ear notching, tail docking, debeaking, dehorning, branding and castration. These activists decry the cruelty that comes to wildlife too because of farm animals, stating that "uncounted millions of other wild animals are lost each year, as their habitats are converted to grazing land and cropland to feed the juggernaut of animal agriculture."

The objectionists then point out how nearly 1.5 million Americans get sick and die each year of heart disease, stroke, cancer and other chronic diseases linked to the consumption of meat and other animal products.

The accusations don't stop there. Going on, they advance the notion that meat causes gout, arthritis, bone fractures in the elderly, cataracts and skin wrinkling. ... and of course, salmonella poisoning, immunity to life-saving penicillin and abnormal sexual development in the children of Puerto Rico.

And there's more! 800 million people around the world are on the verge of starvation they charge, because we feed farm animals the grains and legumes that might save those human lives. As animal farming takes over precious lands, turning them to grazing rather than growing vegetables, we too, face inevitable starvation. We are not surprised then to know that this organization charges that overgrazing likewise devastates the environment by rendering land sterile and polluting our lakes and streams.

What say you to these charges? Surely you could respond to each complaint one by one. Undoubtedly, many of you have already found yourselves defending animal agriculture from one or more of these charges. And yet, the accusations keep on coming and some of them land direct hits.

It is not enough to simply defend oneself from the latest raid on reality. There comes the time when we must inquire from whence they come. When confronted with erroneous charges, distortions and data based on thin air, why do we merely attempt to set a specific record straight and nothing more? It is my opinion that unless we go to the root of the problem, expose the motivations of the malcontents, we will be forever engaged in defending science and technological development from groundless charges and disinformation.

We cannot deny these are costly barrages. It is estimated, for example, that the Natural Resources Defense Council's attack on Alar cost American consumers over 200 million dollars. The apple industry hasn't recovered yet and may never be the same. And who can put a price on the resulting distrust by consumers of legitimate government agencies, agencies charged with the responsibility of ensuring public health and safety?

Do we honestly believe that these accusations and concerns are raised through innocent misunderstandings by people who really want to know the truth? And that if we bring them the facts they will be satisfied?

It was Francis Bacon who said "man prefers to believe what he prefers to be true" and surely we know that some prefer it to be true that they are being poisoned by someone who is earning a profit, and that is just a sad fact of life.

However, we must not let this social aberration dominate the theme of public information and corrupt the very foundations of science. Every good scientist has a personal responsibility to set the record straight. Without that, the rest of us non-scientists are at the mercy of the charlatans.

As new agricultural products are developed and approved, consumers will enjoy such things as leaner pork or tastier fruits and vegetables. It will cost a dairy farmer less to produce milk as a result of a product of biotechnology, Bovine Somatotropin, awaiting approval from the Food and Drug Administration. Farmers also will be more productive because crops of the future will be less vulnerable to stress, diseases and insects.

But there are dissenters to biotechnology. Some people oppose it for fear biotechnology will put farmers out of business. Other agricultural technologies, from the iron plough to the tractor, had displacement effects as they were introduced. But if the product is safe, and if it makes money for farmers, it will be used. Some people oppose biotechnology just because it is biotechnology. They portray it as something that could be turned loose on the environment with unknown results. They're using recent food scares to build sympathy and support, telling consumers that any and all changes are harmful.

But I'm a consumer leader and I disagree.

By now, most of you have learned about Jeremy Rifkin's charges against the use of biotechnologically produced Bovine Somatotropin which is capable of improving the efficiency of milk production in dairy cows.

To simply respond rationally to the Rifkin charges provides a certain amount of credence to his sensationalistic and groundless objection to the science of biotechnology

BST, a naturally occurring protein, a growth hormone, is found in all milk. If Jeremy Rifkin consumes milk, he consumes traces of bovine somatotropin in each and every glass and always has. Surely then, his overwhelming distress and vocal objections to the possible introduction of

this tool has some other basis. Wouldn't it be appropriate to try to find out what that motivation is?

If it turned out that Mr. Rifkin opposed capitalism and so attempted to deliberately obstruct the technological developments that fuel free enterprise, profits and jobs, wouldn't it be easier to discredit his scientific opinions? If he were basing his objection on some unsound hypothetical theory of hyperkinetic energy wouldn't it be easier to disregard his spoutings? I am puzzled why industries adversely affected by this man, and others like him, don't seek to expose the true motivations behind the false charges.

To respond **without** exposing the basis of motivation is like treating the symptoms of illness, no matter how frequently they, or similar symptoms appear, without searching for a cause and cure for the disease.

It would be like fighting World War II in a vacuum, treating the injuries as they occurred, never questioning the motivations of the invaders, never analyzing or attempting to predict the next assault, a war that would never have ended in victory for the Western Alliance if it had not mounted a thoughtful and comprehensive offensive campaign.

You are scientists, accustomed to seeking truth and finding cures.

Rifkin is not a scientist, not a veterinarian. He is surely not a farmer, his income is not dependent upon the production and sale of goods. We don't even know if he is a connoisseur of milk! What then has ticked him off in his tirade against a technology about which he has limited knowledge and for which he turns not to **one** reputable scientist held in high esteem by the majority laboring in the field of animal science? Doesn't that tell us something about the man?

The challenge on Bovine Somatotropin gets more complicated, as you can guess. Even if we were to successfully correct the misinformation of the Rifkins of the world and set the public record straight, the road toward the introduction of this innovative technology would still be rough. Some dairy leaders oppose any new technology that will increase efficiency and productivity within their industry -they may attempt to cower behind the Rifkin charges, or they may express concern over the uncertainty of public acceptance-- but the fact is, in a governmentally imposed system that defies free markets, opposition can be expected by some dairymen when someone comes along with a tool that will enable them to produce milk more efficiently.

The trend in public policy today is very definitely toward increased competition, decontrol, deregulation. One can assume that budget tightening is here to stay and that the days of milk subsidies are numbered. For these reasons and more the truth needs to be told.

Biotechnology is a dramatically promising new management tool. Each of us has cause to celebrate its discov-

ery and development...the companies that will market and profit from its new products, industries such as agriculture and medicine and the consumer, who is the ultimate beneficiary of greater efficiency. The consumer obviously will look to the dairy industry and to the scientific community for signals regarding confidence in technologies like BST. If consumers sense hesitation and concern over safety, they will react accordingly. Distrust is very contagious.

The bottom line is, the public's failure to accept this new technology could be devastating to the dairy industry, in that dairymen would be denied the most encouraging tool to come their way in a long long time. So, this matter of public perception should not be taken lightly.

If the Rifkin crowd wins this one---where is the line to be drawn? After it convinces the public that milking machines are cruel to animals?

The consumers I talk with have no great desire to understand the biological intricacies of how BST works any more than they care to understand how cows produce milk, but they do care to know that it is safe for them and in that, they look to the experts involved in the dairy industry.

Surely the public would wonder about the dairy industry's judgement if it were known that it rejected a promising new and safe technology that could have enhanced productivity, increased efficiency and lowered milk prices.

Consumers would interpret that hesitation to adopt new technologies as a sign that the industry has grown complacent, too insulated and in need of a legislative overhaul.

Even if the industry does adopt BST, the general public may well reach that conclusion, in which case dairymen will need all the tools at their disposal to ensure that the dairy industry continues to excel as a vibrant participant in the competitive worldwide consumer market.

BST is the most encouraging tool to come along for the dairy industry in a long time. Close behind it may be a pork somatotropin which will help bring leaner pork to the butcher counter. Given the freedom to develop these products within the proper regulatory guidelines, scientists will be able to offer U.S. farmers the opportunity to remain competitive.

As an advocate for the consumer's interest, I favor moving the dairy, livestock and other-food producing industries forward progressively, unhampered by intimidation from a few outspoken souls who make their living selling fear and panic.

New technology is what has given U.S. farmers a competitive edge in the international market-place, and consumers abundant, varied, affordable food. Technology travels fast around the globe these days: the United States has less time to be first to take advantage of new ideas especially as we watch Europe marching rapidly into the light of competitive enterprise today.

It is in the consumer's best interest that accurate scientific information and safe technological developments reach those who need them, and that biotechnology be put to good and wise use. To cave in to anti-technology blackmail would be a disaster for the western world.

