

Christmas Comes Early for Monsanto

As you busily prepare for the holidays this year, you may (or may not) be comforted to discover that buying food for such seasonal celebrations will become easier in 2008, at least in Pennsylvania. That's because the Rendell Administration, through its Department of Agriculture (PDA), has decided to prohibit the use of labels on food that threaten to leave you overwhelmed with information and hopelessly confused about which choices to make.

Beginning with dairy products on January 1, 2008, it will be illegal to advertise on a label that the milk, cheese, yogurt, butter or whatever has been produced without the use of synthetic hormones, unnecessary antibiotics, pesticides or any other "compound or substance" that might tend to indicate the superiority of one version of the product over another.

But before you jump for joy given how much easier your life will become, you should realize that this whole show of bravado on the part of our leaders is really aimed for now at protecting us from information about the use of just one product in particular – the Monsanto-produced artificial growth hormone for dairy cows, more commonly known as rBGH or rBST.

And we really can't give all the credit to the bureaucrats in Harrisburg either, because a huge assist in this food system power play must be awarded to the Dairy and Animal Science department at Penn State University, where department head Terry Etherton has become the chief scientific spokesperson in support of this crackdown, both here in Pennsylvania and in other states as well.

News of this monumental decision has already been carried in some of our nation's largest and most respected newspapers, and is now spreading across the blogosphere like ice cream in the light of a hot summer's day. It has certainly made for interesting early-winter reading as emails arrive from across the country with subject lines like "Pennsylvania, what are you doing?" or "We must unite to defeat this scourge!"

Obviously, not everyone is grasping the positive intent of this latest PDA initiative. In fact, hardly anyone is expressing holiday cheer about it, save for those who might expect an invitation to the Monsanto Christmas party this year.

There are darn good reasons for people to be concerned too. The first casualty goes to freedom of speech and the pride many farmers feel in advertising right on their labels the positive production choices they have made. This freedom should be equally available to farmers who might wish to advertise "Artificial hormones used in producing this product" as to those who disavow such substances.

The second loss is to consumer information and choice, a right we cannot afford to take for granted these days. It's really only due to the fact that consumers were choosing milk labeled "rBST-free" or "Produced without synthetic hormones" at such alarming rates that Mon-Santa's elves felt they had to step in anyway.

Let's not forget the plight of the cows in all of this as well – with higher rates of udder infection (mastitis) and shortened lifespan brought on by such performance enhancing drugs, they have been reduced to the status of disposable raw materials in this industrial production process. It's as though the humble cow is now considered by some to be a bottleneck or barrier to higher production quotas.

But the biggest loss of all associated with this poorly conceived and shortsighted decision is to our society in general. As good research is beginning to show, many of the choices made in modern agriculture over the last three or four decades has had the concomitant effect of vastly increasing yields while also slowly degrading the nutritional density of farm products. The result is that eaters in America are often faced with the need to consume more calories in order to acquire the vitamins and minerals their bodies crave – a virtual formula for the obesity epidemic we’re now experiencing.

It might be a little hard on us parents as well, especially as we explain to our children why Barry Bonds might go to jail for lying about use of performance enhancing drugs while the owners of Bovine Bessie are required by law to keep such information in the dark. Don’t we have enough hypocrisy in our society to interpret for them already?

If any of this seems to you just a bad dream, think again. The past year has challenged the officially reinforced confidentiality of our industrial food system in ways not seen since Upton Sinclair wrote The Jungle a century ago. Naturally, the system has begun to fight back.

Perhaps it’s time for all of us to insist that food never again be adulterated in ways only intended to line the pockets of industry captains while putting more good stewards of the land out of business forever.

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