

Marketplace

Friday, January 18, 2008

Penn. governor blocks milk-label ban

Pennsylvania's governor has reversed an effort to ban milk-container labels that tell consumers the milk comes from cows not treated with a growth hormone. Consumer groups are hailing his decision. Sarah Gardner reports.

TEXT OF STORY

KAI RYSSDAL: Earlier this week the Food and Drug Administration ruled meat and milk from cloned animals is as safe to eat as anything else.

Now the state of Pennsylvania has waded into the food safety debate. Regulators there were set to ban milk carton labels saying the contents come from cows not treated with growth hormones. About a third of all American dairy cows are treated with what's called BGH. It makes cows produce more milk.

But yesterday, Governor Ed Rendell approved more modest labeling guidelines instead.

From the Marketplace Sustainability Desk, Sarah Gardner explains.

SARAH GARDNER: Pennsylvania's agriculture commissioner argued that non-BGH labels imply that milk from cows not treated with growth hormone is somehow better or safer and the FDA, he noted, has declared that not so.

But the state's decision to ban those labels provoked a backlash from consumer groups and some dairy farmers. Dairyman Dan Rice was among them:

DAN RICE: I'm not against technology or the use of technology but I think the consumer should be given a choice.

BGH manufacturer Monsanto has fought hard against BGH-free labels. It's appealed to the Federal Trade Commission and even sued individual dairies using these labels. But increasingly, retailers are phasing out BGH milk, including Starbucks, Krogers and even Wal-Mart -- Wal-Mart's private label milk, that is.

They say they're simply responding to consumer demand, but in a recent interview, Monsanto's Michael Doane said milk drinkers are being duped:

MICHAEL DOANE: Misleading labels actually damage the reputation of all dairy products by suggesting there's good milk or bad milk and that's really not true.

BGHs makes up a small part of Monsanto's revenues, but food scholar Marion Nestle says if the company can't stem the backlash against BGH:

MARION NESTLE: Then maybe they'll have a consumer backlash against genetically modified soybeans and corn, which are Monsanto's big moneymakers.

A few other states, including Ohio, are considering bans similar to the one Pennsylvania just rescinded, but Pennsylvania will still require the labels to carry an FDA disclaimer that there's no significant difference between the two kinds of milk.

I'm Sarah Gardner for Marketplace.



Cows await milking at a dairy farm in Epsom, N.H. (Darren McCollester/Newsmakers/Getty Images)