

Milk-Labeling and Marketing Integrity

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By Hon. Dennis C. Wolff

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture

Consumers rely upon the labeling of a product when deciding what to buy for their families. Recently, concern has risen over the way milk products are labeled and the Department of Agriculture has taken action to help consumers make informed decisions about what to buy and to feed their families.

Some labels mislead by promoting what is not in the product, a practice called absence labeling. This marketing strategy is confusing and implies a safe versus not safe product. Considering nearly 75 percent of purchase decisions are made at the point of sale, it's critical that products have correct information on the label.

I take issue with the fact that companies use false food labeling tactics to gain a market advantage. In response, we formed the Food Labeling Advisory Committee – made up of a dieticians, consumer advocates and food industry representatives – to offer direction on addressing this issue.

They advised the department to use its authority in labeling oversight under the Milk Sanitation Law and the Food Act to review labels.

The department has taken action on the committee's recommendations. We looked at the labels of 140 dairy companies that sell milk in the commonwealth and of those 17 from six states use labels that were considered

inaccurate or misleading. We are requiring those companies to correct labels by January 1, 2008.

To get to this point, we performed an extensive search for information and studies related to hormones and rBST in milk. We consulted the very best nonpartisan and independent studies, including those of the National Institute of Health, the World Health Organization and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). We also researched editorials and articles in major national publications including The Washington Post and The New York Times.

I believe that these efforts will help protect those who are most vulnerable to misleading labels, in terms of both health and the effect on their pocketbooks. Consumers want affordable food and also want assurance that they are selecting the best product for their families' nutrition and overall health. When these desires are met with confusing or misleading food labels, it is the department's job to help give them the resources necessary to make an informed decision.

Advertising of this kind is damaging the image of such an important part of our diets – milk and dairy products. This simply encourages the consumption of less healthy beverages.

Let's look at some of the trends in milk consumption compared to other drinks – soft drink consumption has increased by 30 percent and milk consumption has decreased by 30 percent in the last 20 years. Studies show that 88 percent of teenaged girls are calcium deficient with the risk of developing osteoporosis. Milk and dairy products are one of the richest sources of calcium.

Also, adolescent obesity is the number one child health issue in the United States. By encouraging youth to consume healthy foods like milk and dairy products, combined with an active lifestyle, we can combat that troubling issue as well.

All processed milk sold in PA is tested at least 10 times to guarantee that it is free of any substances like antibiotics, chemicals and pesticides, which are illegal for milk to contain.

Ultimately, we are seeking a solution to the labeling issue that will benefit those who produce Pennsylvania's food and those who consume it. When shoppers stop at the dairy case in their local supermarket, they can make informed decisions about the dairy products they buy without marketing language that implies safe versus unsafe products.