



Raw milk: Addressing the risks

By JOHN VOGEL

THERE'S more to selling raw milk than filling a bottle when a neighbor or customer comes carrying cash. If and when that customer falls ill after drinking your milk, your troubles stretch all the way to those charged with protecting food safety in your state.

It's no longer just your problem, declares Bill Chirdon, director of food safety at Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Maligned by raw milk advocates for heavy-handedness, he adds: "You won't get that call from that frightened, crying woman when her family is sick because of ingesting raw milk. I do!"

Raw milk-related illnesses rarely affect just a few persons. "We've had raw milk issues with as many as 100 sick kids."

The margin for error is very slim. "It really is the perfect food for humans — and for bacteria," Chirdon explains. "Whole milk tends to clump together, and can sometimes mask the bacteria, making it hard to detect."

Young children and the elderly are most susceptible to food-borne illnesses. The further each generation is removed from the farm, the more sus-

Key Points

- Confirmed food poisonings aren't just the producer's problem.
- Raw milk's safety margin of error is extremely slim.
- Animal stress can trigger bacterial shedding in manure and milk.

ceptible their "guts" are to organisms they aren't adapted to, adds the food safety bureau chief.

Last year's Hendricks case

Pennsylvania's Department of Health was notified first of alleged *Campylobacter* bacterial poisoning possibly linked to Hendricks Farms & Dairy in early September 2008. By the first weekend, health and ag food safety investigators were trying to determine the source.

Directly consumed tainted water was not a common denominator, Chirdon maintains. "*Campylobacter* was confirmed in only one sample from an unlabeled, open milk bottle — but never in the bulk tank."

But by Sept. 12, seven cultured cases from seven unrelated households in

Pennsylvania and New York were confirmed. All had one common connection: Hendricks' raw milk. Others in those households also experienced similar gastrointestinal illness. That's when the health officials chose to alert the public with a news release.

By Sept. 24, the confirmed count reached 25 individuals, according to health department releases. Another 43 individuals had a similar but unconfirmed illness.

When an outbreak happens, Chirdon and staff put all efforts into helping solve the problem. "We want to help the farmer get back into business as soon as possible. The outbreak had a definite start and end," he notes. "It coincided with one change — bringing four or five new cows into the milking operation. Moving a freshening cow from one farm to another is a big change. We know that stress can trigger bacterial shedding in milk and/or manure."

After two weeks of extensive milk testing, the dairy was allowed to start selling raw milk again. "Hendricks was doing the best job he could," concludes Chirdon. "But there's always a risk when consuming raw milk."

Push for program to certify raw milk

FOR the last two years, Jerry Snyder has led a one-man campaign to have New York approve a raw milk certification program, and open the gate to off-farm retail sales. Why?

"It's a way for consumers to reconnect with the farmer, and pay him or her for a product that's healthier than pasteurized milk," he says. "A huge percentage of our customers is lactose-intolerant. They drink it because the lactase enzymes are still active — not killed by pasteurization."

But, the certified organic producer and certifier adds, "I can't sell 700 gallons of raw milk every other day off the farm." New York law allows only on-farm sales of raw milk.

All raw milk sold at his Sunny Cove Farm is consumed within five days, adds the Alfred, N.Y., dairyman. "What goes on the tanker [to processors] has to last five weeks."

What he proposes

Farms that meet federal Grade A standards or better deserve to be paid for it, contends Snyder. That's one reason this dairy went organic. Receiving close to \$30 per cwt. for the last seven to eight years has allowed this family farm to make many improvements.

Snyder proposes improving the



"Reconnecting with the consumer is a must for dairy farmers. High-quality raw milk has no greater risk than pasteurized milk, and it's much healthier to drink."
JERRY SNYDER

safety and reliability of raw milk via higher standards, such as these:

- Closed herds. They help reduce introduction of diseased animals.
- Weekly pathogen testing. Snyder rigorously tests his milk.
- Much lower somatic cell and bacterial count standards. He has proposed a bacterial standard of 5,000 per milliliter and a somatic cell count, or SCC, standard of 200,000.

"Consumers want a safe, superior quality, and to reconnect with the farmer. We can produce it without pasteurization, and it's a healthier food than pasteurized milk in several respects," he contends.

However, dairy industry leaders and food safety regulators remain cool to the idea, citing higher human health risks of unpasteurized milk. Even so, Snyder, backed by natural foods advocates, keeps building the case for certifying super-quality raw milk for retail sale.

"Usually, nothing changes if nothing changes. But our industry badly needs change," he concludes.

Visit Sunny Cove on the Web at www.sunnycovefarm.com.

What it takes to sell raw milk in Pennsylvania

BASED on permits, Pennsylvania is the nation's largest raw milk-producing state.

"We have 122 farms with raw milk permits," says Bill Chirdon, director of Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Food Safety. Another 35 are in-process.

Especially with today's milk prices, there's powerful incentive to sell raw milk. "Some farmers are selling 1,000 gallons a week at \$3 a gallon. That's a lot of money," he adds.

"Today, our bureau spends considerable time with raw milk producers. We are pulling more milk samples than ever before, and doing more education to reduce consumer health risks. The more we can do to make sure permitted producers comply with regulations, the better," he says.

That producer education is working, he says. "In 2007, 8.4% of raw milk tested positive for pathogenic bacteria.

So far this year, less than 2% has tested positive. That a huge improvement!"

But just because you're a good dairy farmer doesn't mean you'll be a good raw milk producer.

The food safety bureau chief stresses that there are many more issues to deal with: drinking-water quality, new animals coming onto the farm, milking equipment troubles, milking procedural errors, packaging and storage, to name a few.

The biggest concern may be liability. "It's an enormous risk." He adds, "There are times when insurance companies don't even know producers are marketing raw milk. Producers need multimillion-dollar coverage, and it's very expensive."

What you need to know

The ag department has published guidelines to help educate prospective raw milk producers. Here are a few key "musts" from that document.

- Animals must be brucellosis-free

and tuberculosis-free, and pass an annual veterinary exam.

■ Farm well water must test bacteriologically safe at least every six months.

■ Bacteria (plate count) cannot exceed 20,000 per milliliter.

■ Coliform count: not more than 10. Somatic cell: not more than 1 million.

■ Sample and test raw milk at least twice a month for pathogens and drugs.

■ No pathogenic bacteria, including *Salmonellae*, *Campylobacter*, *Listeria monocytogenes* or *E. coli* 0157:H7 can be present.

Those are the legal limits. But Chirdon wouldn't advise producers who have trouble keeping somatic cell counts, for instance, under 400,000 and closer to 200,000 to seek a permit.

The complete document is downloadable from the Web site www.agriculture.state.pa.us/agriculture/lib/agriculture/foodsafetyfiles/rawmilk_guidance_doc.pdf.