

Group advocates choice in production

By JENNIFER VINCENT



FROM a seller's perspective, you have to react and embrace consumer and retailer mentality regardless of how painful or costly it may be. Or, work to change it.

I've been to several grower meetings this winter and many of the agendas contain a discussion on how commer-

Editor's Note

cial animal agriculture is being dictated by activists. Federally approved, scientifically sound technologies, like the use of rBST, are being challenged based on emotion or perceived benefits of some "natural" products.

It's an exciting time to be in agriculture, but it's also risky. Consumer demands, or more accurately perceived

consumer demands, are edging retailers to require certain production practices or lack thereof. A few months ago I wrote about how Kroger is demanding that all milk be produced without rBST. There's also efforts to do away with gestational crates for sows, while others are challenging the use of Roundup Ready sugarcorn and pushing for chickens to be raised exclusively free range.

New organization formed

At the recent Great Lakes Regional Dairy

Conference in Frankenmuth, producers were introduced to a new organization, American Farmers for the Advancement and Conservation of Technology.

LouAnn Troxel, communications team leader for AFACT, said the organization was originally formed to represent dairy farmers being forced to abandon the use of rBST. It has since expanded to include all animal agriculture.

AFACT's message is that the producer should have access to safe, federally approved and proven technologies, and have the choice to use them.

In addition to milking 130 head of Holstein cows, Troxel and her husband, Tom, a large-animal veterinarian, manage a veterinary practice from their Indiana home. The Troxels actively promote the dairy industry, having hosted several thousand school children at their dairy farm and sponsored numerous international veterinary and high school exchange students.

"Educating the people around you is more important than ever," she says. "There have been more than 3,000 peer-reviewed articles on the safeness of using rBST, and there is not an animal scientist or doctor of veterinary medicine that is opposed to the technology on safety measures. However, this is not about facts. This is a debate on perceptions, and we are losing it. We need to articulate what we do, why we do it and justify it."

On the horizon

Troxel went on to say that rBST may be just the first line of fire. "What's next? Is the general public going to question synchronization programs, antibiotics to treat sick animals, genetically modified feedstuffs, animal housing and restraints, artificial insemination, tail docking, de-horning, or genetic advancements?"

Just look at the agendas of several large activist groups:

- Organic Consumers: "Our goal is 100% organic-only agriculture by the year 2030."

- PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals): "Our long-term goal is to rid the world of animal agriculture and convert everyone to plant-based diets."

- Whole Foods: "It would be better if human beings would stop killing, eating, enslaving and exploiting animals."

- U.S. Humane Society: "Our goal is to abolish all of animal agriculture."

I'm not against individual beliefs, but those are scary statements.

Jim Byrum, president of the Michigan Agri-Business Association, summed it up pretty well in a recent newsletter: "With 75 million more people inhabiting planet Earth every year, it raises an interesting question about how the industry can support using more and more scarce acres for less and less production."

AFACT is a nonprofit organization that's in its infancy. It's looking for members who care about preserving proven animal technologies. There are no fees or dues. Five key tactical teams have been established so far to guide the organization's activities, and producers are invited to learn more by signing up to receive updates and information at www.itisafact.org.

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