

Michigan Editorial

Is non-rbST milk really better for you?

By JENNIFER VINCENT



WHAT'S bST? In short, it's a naturally occurring hormone in dairy cows that directs milk production. More bST, more milk. Years ago, scientists learned how to reproduce an exact copy of this substance by means of recombinant DNA technologies. This duplicated version of bST is called recombinant bovine somatotropin or rbST (also

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known as Posilac), and farmers have been using it successfully and safely for almost 20 years to prolong higher milk yields later into the lactation cycle.

I would venture to guess that all dairy farmers know what it is and how it works. But, does the average consumer?

One of the state's largest grocers,

Kroger, says consumers not only know what it is, but they are demanding dairy farmers discontinue using it. Kroger plans to only carry milk that is produced without rbST.

Kroger is one of Michigan Milk Producers Association's largest customers, and this mandate put the farmer-driven board of directors into a real pickle. Rather than lose that contract, MMPA has made the difficult decision to ban the use of rbST by its dairy farmers by Feb. 1.

Taking this herd management tool from farmers because of so-called "customer demand" seems extreme. Cows treated with rbST are likely to produce 10% to 20% more milk. How will producers compensate for that loss?

At the heart of this issue is trust. Do you trust the Food and Drug Administration?

In 1985, the FDA after exhaustive review determined that meat and milk derived from cattle given rbST are safe for human consumption. FDA stated that milk from a cow supplemented with rbST "is not different" from that of a non-supplemented cow.

All cow's milk has always contained miniscule amounts of bST, normally less than 10 parts per billion. Milk from rbST-treated cows does not differ in vitamin content or in concentrations of nutritionally important mineral elements.

FDA also concluded that a cow does not pass rbST into her milk in proportion to the amount that is present in her body. Instead, her body "burns up" the rbST to produce increased amounts of milk.

In addition, scientists have established that rbST and all growth hormones are species specific, meaning they only affect the species that it comes from.

On the radar screen?

Are consumers really demanding this mandate, or is it coming from uneducated activists that represent a small portion of society? I decided to conduct my own experiment. I consulted a handful of friends and family by first asking if they even knew what rbST was and if they would choose a gallon of milk that was labeled as free of the growth hormone rbST over non-labeled "regular" milk?

My mom said she would not immediately choose non-rbST milk, but would seek out more information. Once I explained what it was and that "regular" milk cannot be differentiated from non-rbST milk, she said price, fat content and expiration date would be her driving factors for purchase. I got the same from friends Scott and Verna.

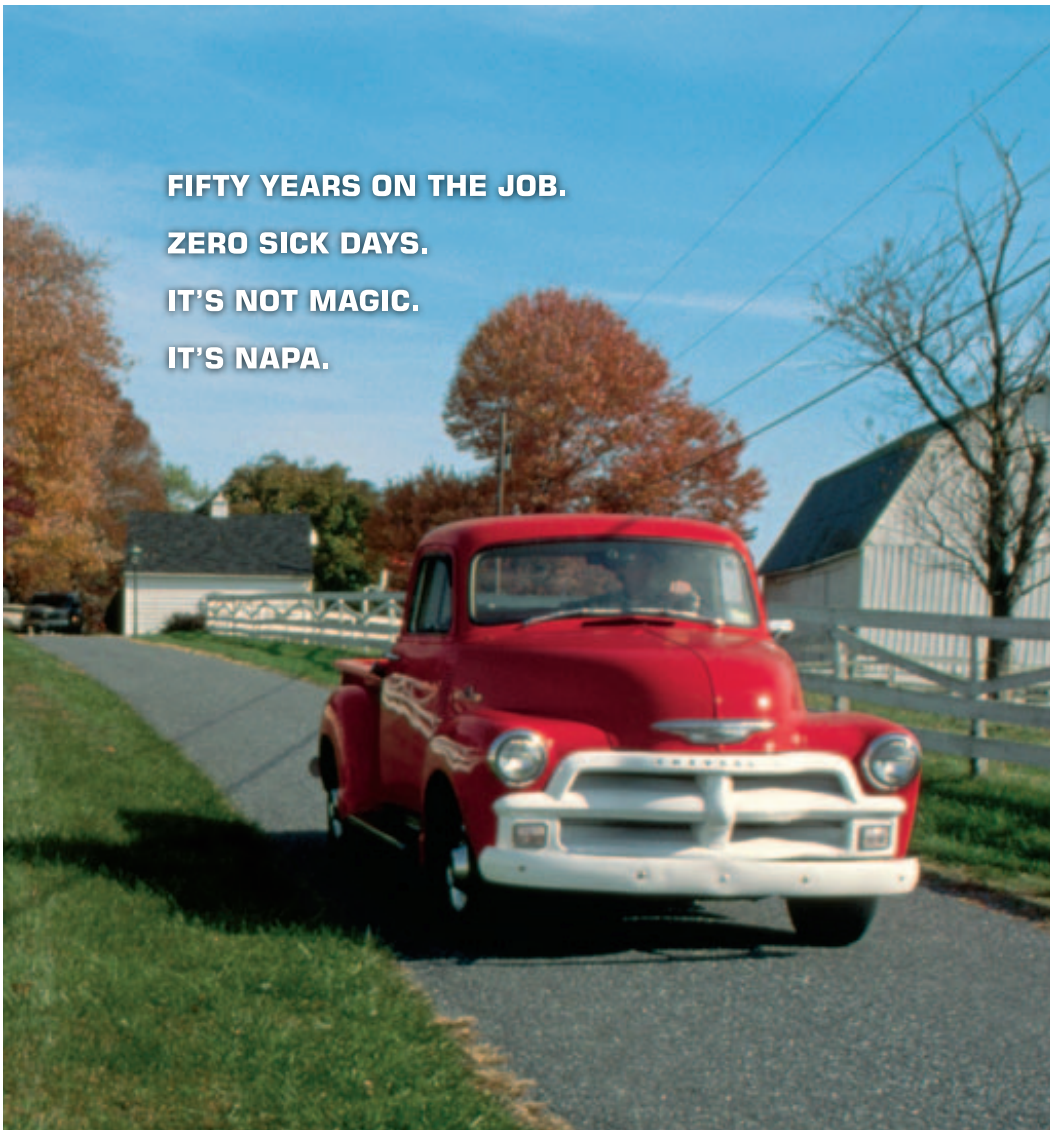
But, my friend Cari has concerns with hormones in food and the effect it might have on her 5-year-old daughter, so she buys organic milk, noting its hormone- and antibiotics-free label.

But, what she didn't know is that all milk is free of those compounds, and is produced and processed under strict sanitation guidelines. I explained that the industry is stringently tested and inspected, but she still had reservations.

My friend Barb, who comes from a farm background, seriously questioned FDA's scrutiny of rbST and said it has been wrong about other foods and practices approved that later proved to be questionable, including artificial sweetener. She has an extensive organic garden and believes in raising as much of her family's food as possible.

So, even though the federal government has determined that rbST is harmless to both animals and the environment, suspicion lingers.

My question is: How will Kroger and MMPA enforce this mandate when the end product is identical? I will continue to look for what's on sale.



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