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Dairies wait for consumer perceptions to catch up with science

Key Points

- It has been three years since consumer perception turned against rBST.
- Many dairy co-ops have banned use of the hormone in fluid milk production.
- Dairy expert says retailer, not consumer, perception is keeping the ban in place.

By JOSH FLINT

IN the mid-1990s, most dairy producers heralded recombinant bovine somatotropin as one of the greatest innovations in milking.

Biweekly injections could capably increase a cow's daily milk production more than 15%. With the 2000s came a shift in public opinion against milk from rBST-treated cows. In 2008, the effects of consumer opinion were felt when Walmart decided to stock milk only from cows not treated with rBST.

According to Prairie Farms chairman and Olney dairyman Fred Kuenstler, this is around the time many Illinois milk producers shelved the valuable tool. Walmart and Kroger are Prairie Farms' two largest customers. When they ruled against rBST, Prairie Farms adapted, Kuenstler explains.

"To stop using rBST never made sense for us right from the start," Kuenstler says. "But Walmart accounts for over 30% of our business. And they decided they didn't want it anymore."

As a result, the dairy cooperative drafted affidavits and distributed them to the producers. By signing the agreement, milk producers agree to not use rBST for fluid milk production. Kuenstler notes they do receive a 67-cent-per-cwt. premium payment each month.

While many dairy producers question the legitimacy of retailers' decision to no longer stock rBST milk, Kuenstler says Prairie Farms is serious when it comes to enforcement. Co-op field men make bi-monthly visits to verify the supplements used in milk production. If rBST is found, producers are relieved of their Prairie Farms contract indefinitely.

Marketing games

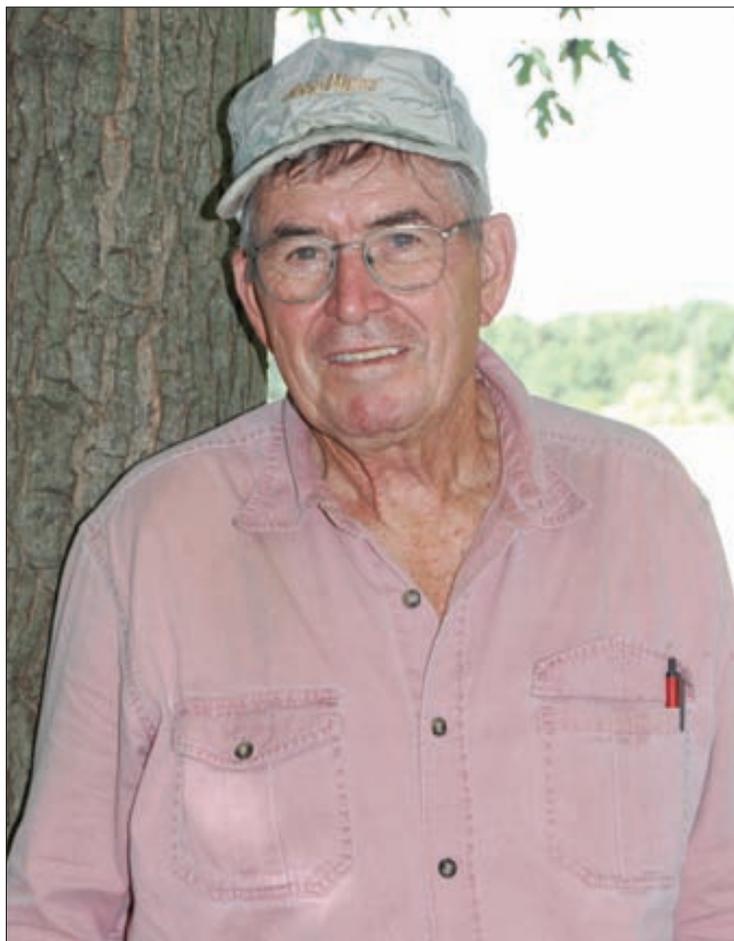
To date, cheesemakers have not banned rBST. Thus, a good portion of Illinois milk producers still use the hormone.

Jim Fraley, manager of the Illinois Milk Producers Association, hopes one day the public will embrace the use of rBST in milk production.

"The irony in all of this is, in asking producers not to use this technology, you are increasing the carbon footprint of the dairy industry," Fraley notes.

USDA's official statement is there is no difference in the milk from rBST and non-rBST cows. In fact, Fraley says no test can accurately deduce whether milk was produced using the hormone.

Even though many co-ops, like Prairie Farms, have decided to not use rBST in



RBST LOGIC: Prairie Farms chairman and Olney dairyman Fred Kuenstler doesn't see the scientific logic behind banning rBST in fluid milk production. However, the dairy co-op's customers demanded it, so the co-op complied.

Facts about milk

- Since World War II, milk production per cow has increased 4.5 times.
- The dairy industry produces more milk with a herd one-third the size of the pre-WWII herd.
- It takes five Mexican cows to produce as much milk as one U.S. cow.

SOURCE: ILLINOIS MILK PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION

fluid milk production, Fraley proudly reports they haven't made a big deal of it on the label. This is somewhat surprising in today's marketing-language-laden food industry.

"I think milk bottlers see milk as a wholesome product in itself," Fraley explains. "So they don't think it's necessary to confuse the product with the label."

Unfortunately, other milk-derived product producers haven't been so wholesome in their motives. The Illinois Department of Public Health recently took issue with Ben and Jerry's labeling containers of ice cream as "BST-free." Since all milk contains BST (a naturally occurring hormone), the court system ruled in favor of Illinois milk producers and processors.

Today, the ice cream company's labels explain that Ben and Jerry's milk producers pledge not to use rBST. This is followed by USDA's statement that there is no significant difference between the two types of milk, Fraley notes.

Changing opinions

Since Walmart's non-rBST decree in 2008, Fraley wonders if consumers still care about the issue. He's watched as a number of cheesemakers began producing non-rBST cheese. "Consumers didn't seem to care," he notes.

He estimates that 99% of consumers do not care if milk is produced using rBST. At one time, many consumers believed the hormone caused teens to enter puberty sooner. According to Fraley, further scientific research indicates this could be linked to obesity rather than rBST.

In the 1950s, a scientific study involved injecting humans with BST to treat dwarfism, Fraley adds. The problem is, the human body simply consumes BST, as it does any other protein.

"Most consumers indicate freshness, quality and price as the three biggies when they buy milk," Fraley adds. "I hope retailer perception starts to change on this topic."