"rbGH-Free" Momentum Building in U.S.

More and more U.S. dairy processors are responding to consumer concerns by selling "rbGH-Free" dairy products. This trend was building fast, even before recent reports that rbGH–related hormones in milk were causing increased multiple human births.

by Pete Hardin

Increased consumer demand for "rbGH-Free" dairy products is driving more dairy processors to require their raw milk supplies contain no milk from dairy farms using Monsanto's synthetic, milk-stimulating cow growth hormone—"Posilac".

Some raw milk marketers are absorbing higher costs to find a home for milk from farms using "Posilac". The tempo of "anti-rbGH" consumer sentiment is building fast, particularly on the West Coast and the East Coast.

Historic consumer opposition to injecting U.S. dairy cows with milk-boosting, synthetic hormones runs very, very deep. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several years before Posilac was commercially sold, multiple consumer opinion surveys consistently showed that about 75-80% percent of consumers thought it was a bad idea to inject cows with synthetic hormones to boost milk output. Truth be known … this issue is clearly a case where consumers' gut-level skepticism proved far wiser than the assurances of government officials, dairy industry flunkies, and university professors who asserted "human safety" of milk from rbGH-injected cows.

Recent events show demand for "rbGH-Free" dairy products is galloping. Over the years, public skepticism about potential human dangers from hormone-residues in rbGH-derived milk have not gone away. Amid the back-and-forth assertions of "dangers" (by critics) and "safety" (by Monsanto's allies), one fact stands clear: consumer demand for "rbGH-Free" milk is growing each year. And lately, such demand is galloping.

Wal-Mart pushing "rbGH-Free" milk

The word in the dairy industry is that a major push for "rbGH-Free" milk is coming from the nation's largest fluid milk retailer: Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is pressuring its primary packaged milk supplier--Dean Foods for "rbGH-Free" fluid products. And Dean Foods, in turn, is demanding "rbGH-Free" farm milk from its near-exclusive supplier, Dairy Farmers of America. (

More processors go "rbGH-Free

On June 1, 2006, the Dean Foods' fluid milk plant at Florence, New Jersey shifted to a "rbGH-Free" status. Raw milk marketers supplying that plant must have certificates from all their dairy producers swearing they don't use "Posilac" at all. Indeed, selling raw milk to fluid processors in New England, eastern New York, New York City, metropolitan New Jersey … down to the Philadelphia market is increasingly difficult. Fluid milk processors in southern New England are almost rock-solid in their demands for "rbGH-Free" raw milk. Farmland Dairies (Wallington, NJ), Hood/Crowley (in New England) and Dean Foods (New England and New Jersey) all tout "rbGH-Free" milk claims to their consumers.

Late word arrives from Montoana that two fluid mil processors–Darigold (the local co-op) and Meadow Gold (Dean Foods)–have announced they will be "rbGH-Free".

No prior consumer concerns about rbGH-milk will be reduced by recent findings reported in the May 2006 issue of *The Journal of Reproductive Nutrition*, where author Dr. Gary Steinman reports that a secondary hormone related to "Posilac" injections—Insulin-like Growth Factor-1 (IGF-1), may be causing up to a five-fold increase in births of twins in milk-drinking women in the U.S.

Meatrix 2 video targets factory dairies/rbGH

Public debate about rbGH milk (and added IGF-1) in consumer dairy products has spread far beyond the ability of mere dairy industry public relations to contain. Earlier in 2006, a food activist group unveiled a Web site-based presentation titled "The Meatrix 2"—which attacks "factory dairies". That group's first presentation—"The Meatrix"—an expose on feedlot beef industry practices, was viewed by about 10 *million* persons.

To see a copy of this video, go to the Web site:

www.themeatrix2.com

At that Web site, to find the policy statements on rbGH, click on "U.S." and then "Food".

The "Meatrix 2" video contains supplemental information that focuses on the Starbucks coffee chain. Starbucks is the highly-profitable, national upscale coffee chain with thousands of outlets. Starbucks is a major purchaser of cream—used in those fancy latte coffee drinks. If Starbucks were to declare a "rbGH-Free" policy for cream purchases, that could almost single-handedly force cream suppliers to shift to "no rbGH" milk/cream procurement policies.

Perhaps recent surging demands by dairy processors' for "rbGH-Free" milk supplies is a straight-line correlation to increased publicity about dangers of hormone-laden, rbGH-derived milk products … regardless of whether consumers concerns are being spawned by cartoons or medical journal articles.

Oregon PSR group pushes anti-rbGH facts …

Carefully watching increased, "rbGH-Free" consumer dairy trends is Rick North (Durham, Oregon). For almost three years, North has spearheaded the "Campaign for Safe Food" for the Oregon chapter of the Physicians for Social Responsibility focusing on food safety. In general, the group has dealt with Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) food safety issues, but with a particular focus on rbGH.

The Web site for that group is:

www.oregonpsr.org

North, who previously worked for the American Cancer Society, directs an effective, fact-based campaign promoting "rbGH-Free" dairy products in the Pacific Northwest. North's group does not "target" processors, but has worked "communicating" the growing list of human safety concerns about rbGH-derived cows' milk to dairy processors in the region. That task hasn't always been welcomed by dairy executives.

But North points to several "rbGH-Free" declarations by dairy processors in the Pacific Northwest as feathers in the cap of the "Campaign for Safe Food".

* On April 1, 2005, the Tillamook Cooperative Creamery Assn. of Oregon declared that its prized cheeses would no longer contain milk from Posilac-injected cows. Tillamook's leadership saw sales of the co-op's pre-eminent branded cheeses impacted by consumer concerns about rbGH. After the Tillamook co-op board of directors announced a "rbGH-Free" policy for its cheeses, then Posilac's manufacturer—Monsanto—tried to disrupt the co-op's membership.

* In the summer 2006, Alpenrose Dairy (Redmond, Oregon) became completely "rbGH-Free".

* In December 2005, Darigold's Seattle, Washington's fluid milk supply went "rbGH-Free". Darigold (formerly operating as West Farm) is moving step-by-step, according to Rick North. In February 2006, Darigold shifted production of its yogurt to a "rbGH-Free" plant.

Global hospital wellness group: anti-rbGH

Rick North reports another key organization is involved with the "anti-rbGH" effort is an international group—Health Care Without Harm. That group consists of some 443 organizations in 52 countries. Health Care Without Harm promotes safe practices in hospitals. Originally, the organization focused on eliminating mercury from hospitals and safe disposal of medical waste. In June 2005, Health Care Without Harm came out against feeding dairy products processed from milk from farms using Posilac. The group's "rbGH-Free" policy states:

"Health Care Without Harm opposes the use of recombinant bovine growth hormone (rbGH or rbST)—a synthetic hormone given to cows to increase milk production, due to the adverse impact upon animals and the potential harm to humans. We therefore urge health care providers to purchase non-rbGH milk from suppliers."

The Web site for Health Care Without Harm is:

www.noharm.org

Key human health issue: higher IGF-1 levels:

The discipline that Rick North has followed at the Campaign for Safe Food is to present fact-based human health/safety concerns, in opposing Posilac-derived milk. The specific human health concern is elevated levels of a powerful, secondary hormone: IGF-1.

The Campaign for Safe Food cites research showing elevated levels of blood IGF-1 for persons consuming rbGH-derived cows' milk. Back when the federal Food and Drug Administration originally approved commercial sale of rbGH, that agency claimed that the additional IGF-1 in milk from rbGH-injected dairy cows would be destroyed by digestive acids. Subsequent research has shown that presumption is not true: the IGF-1 is shepherded through the human digestive tract by casein (protein) molecules in milk.

At that Web site, look particularly for the eight-page brochure titled, "Know Your Milk."

Warning: "rbGH-Free" wave surging

More than a dozen years after Monsanto's biotech cow hormone was approved for commercial sale, consumer demand for "rbGH-Free" dairy products is dramatically rising. FDA's original assertions about rbGH human "safety"—especially those involving the secondary hormone, IGF-1—look increasingly bogus as time and scientific knowledge about IGF-1 grow.

The recent journal article that correlates dramatically higher rates of "twins" birthed to non-vegan women in the U.S. with elevated levels of IGF-1 in dairy products promises to further fuel public desires to avoid milk from farms using Posilac.