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President's Corner

The Larger Issue About Food Labeling

Carl T. Shaffer, PFB President

The recent action by the PA Department of Agriculture concerning the labeling of milk by a few dairy processors gets to the heart of a larger issue of food labeling which has been of growing concern to those of us who produce food.

Although the headlines and arguments surrounding the Agriculture Department's action focus on the use of r-bST as a production practice on some dairy farms, Agricultural Secretary Dennis Wolff properly notes a much broader problem with food labeling. He cites and provides fair warning about the growing practice among some food marketers to engage in "absence labeling". That is when words are placed on a label opposed to what is in the product. Never mind that scientific research and countless tests may have proven the substance harmless. It's revealing, by the way, that a disclaimer to such statements might be placed on the label, but always in very fine print.

So what are the potential consequences for agriculture from misleading labeling and mistruths about production practices? We can look to the past for insight about our future.

Modern day food scare marketing took off in 1989.

A communications company and lobby group with their own agendas persuaded the media that a production aid used on apples (Alar) was carcinogenic. The media blitz was huge, driven in part by the infamous episode on the CBS program "60-Minutes". "Alar-Free" food labels showed up everywhere. Alar was soon removed from the market. But real research showed that, in fact, Alar was not the toxic nightmare it was portrayed to be. One would have to drink 13,000 liters of apple juice a day to increase the risk of cancer.

The former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop stated in 1991, "If Alar ever posed a health hazard, I would have said so ... Alar-treated apples posed no hazard to the health of children or adults." The following year, the American Medical Association (AMA) editorialized about how the Alar scare had taken science out of context and how the risks were blown out

of proportion. The facts didn't matter. Meanwhile, apple growers suffered devastating economic losses and many had to give up their livelihood.

Agriculture has great responsibility – as well as great self-interest – to provide consumers with clear and accurate information. It's also vital that we respond to their questions and concerns. But that doesn't mean surrendering to "popular myths" even if they seem like a tidal wave.

Every farm in Pennsylvania relies in some way on new science and technology to keep ahead of soaring costs and the auctioneer. What will the next "absence label" claim? "Free From Genetic Breeding"? "No GMO Seeds Used"? "Harvested Without Immigrant Labor"? "Not Produced By Robotic Milking"?

Will agriculture unite behind the principle that all misleading and inaccurate claims about food and farm practices must be challenged? Or, will we as individual farmers pick and choose the practices we will advance and defend, depending upon which ones we fancy on our own farm?

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau members – through our grassroots policy development process – have spoken clearly about the need to unite on this issue. That's why

Farm Bureau is working hard to enlighten and win support from lawmakers, the media and public for food labeling practices that inform rather than mislead. PA Agriculture Secretary Dennis Wolff also deserves our applause and support for taking on the challenge.

