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Use of Synthetic Hormone Raises a Myriad of Concerns

By CHARLENE LAVOIE

The Federal Food and Drug Administration recently approved the sale and use of Posilac, a synthetic growth hormone that stimulates and increases milk production in cows.

The use of this synthetic growth hormone has raised many issues, from health concerns (it has never been tested on humans) to the environmental impact. A study by Consumers Union, the publisher of Consumer Reports, calls the use of synthetic growth hormone into serious question. The report states that people are very concerned and will not buy milk produced with synthetic growth hormone, even if they have to switch brands or pay more, and that they want package labeling to let them know the synthetic growth hormone is being used.

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The chemical industry wants you to believe that the synthetic growth hormone is the same as the natural growth hormone in cows, but it is not. The synthetic growth hormone is produced by genetically engineering bacteria which make the cow produce more milk for a longer period of time than its natural hormone cycle...

An overlooked aspect of the debate is the economics of increased milk production for the farmers and for consumers/taxpayers. There continues to be a national milk surplus that drives down market prices, involves the Federal Government (taxpayers) in purchasing the surplus and shifts the cost burden to the small farmer who often ends up making less than it costs to produce the dairy product.

The Federal Dairy Price Support Program spends millions of taxpayer dollars each year to buy up the surplus of milk and dairy products for which dairy farmers can find no other market. The glut of milk from 1980 to 1985 led Congress to enact a voluntary dairy-herd termination program. The Government paid dairy farmers to slaughter their dairy cows and agree to refrain from dairy farming for at least five years. During 1987 to 1989 taxpayers paid over $600 million each year to purchase surplus milk.

The 1990 Federal Farm Law now makes farmers responsible for the costs of buying surplus milk. Dairy farmers pay an assessment for Government purchase of excess dairy products. This tax increases as the surplus increases. All dairy farmers must pay this assessment whether or not they increase their own production of milk with the use of the synthetic growth hormone.

Increased milk supply is assured with the introduction of the synthetic growth hormone. In fact, this is what the chemical producers use as the biggest selling point. The increase in milk production will increase the surplus. Consumers promise that the use of the synthetic growth hormone will lead to a decrease in the consumption of dairy products, which will also increase the surplus. The increased production of milk will end up costing farmers and taxpayers plenty to buy up the surplus.

The F.D.A. approval of this chemical is another bad decision in the flawed Federal dairy policy. There is no need for this technology and it makes no sense. There is no benefit to the consumer, the farmer, or the cows. In fact, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. Indeed, it is likely that the only groups to benefit from the approval of the synthetic growth hormone are the chemical and pharmaceutical companies who sell it: Monsanto, Upjohn, American Cyanamid and Elanco, a division of Eli Lilly.

In the final analysis we must be cautious when the F.D.A. and the chemical companies say the use of this synthetic growth hormone is safe and beneficial. After all, the F.D.A. approved the use of the chemicals thalidomide, DDT and Alar with the urging of the chemical industry.

In the meantime, the F.D.A. must not allow the economic interest of the chemical companies to be an obstacle to consumer choice.

Right now, the F.D.A. policy permits dairy products that come from cows not injected with synthetic growth hormone to say so on the label. The F.D.A. recently stated that it is aware of the public desire to know whether a dairy product is from cows injected with the synthetic hormone. But the chemical industry does not want consumers to know which dairy products come from cows injected with the synthetic hormone. So the Administration is under pressure from the chemical industry to reconsider the labeling policy.

Citizens should let the F.D.A. know that they want their Government to listen and not ignore their concerns: dairy products, whether produced with or without the synthetic growth hormone, must be labeled.

Interested citizens can call Michelle Smith at the F.D.A.'s office for Food Labeling at (202) 205-5099, or Shelly Davis, F.D.A. Office of Plants, Dairy Foods and Beverages at (202) 205-4681, to remind the F.D.A. that consumers want a choice.

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