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Mandatory rBGH Labeling Bill Introduced

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

On February 3, 1994, genetically engineered Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) went on sale to farmers across the country. Despite overwhelming opposition to the hormone by consumers and dairy farmers, the FDA has not required the labeling of milk and dairy products derived from cows injected with rBGH. As Steve Gilman stated in his article "Milking Farmers and Consumers" (*NOFA-NY News*, May/June 1994) "... there is no real need for rBGH technology. It only serves to fatten corporate coffers, and milks farmers and consumers to do so."

At last federal legislation affecting rBGH use has been introduced that would benefit both the dairy consumer, and the small dairy farmer. On June 21st Rep. Bernard Sanders (I-VT) introduced the Bovine Growth Hormone Milk Act (H.R. 4618) which has three primary titles:

Title I: Requires mandatory labeling of milk and milk products produced by rBGH-injected cows.

Title II: Provides that the increase in costs to the government which are attributable to the use of rBGH will only be assessed against the price received for milk produced by cows injected with rBGH. Hence the average taxpayer will be spared the expense of the government having to buy surplus milk that results from the use of rBGH. Estimated savings are $500 million over the next five years.

Title III: Mandates development of a test to detect rBGH in milk, and therefore, assure compliance with labeling laws. The test will be available to public health and agricultural agencies. (Although Monsanto, manufacturer of rBGH, has argued that no test for rBGH is possible, European scientists have reported (*Journal of Immunoassay*, March 1994) using such a test in their lab and appear to have laid the groundwork for a commercial test.)

As of July 25th only six NY federal representatives had co-sponsored this legislation: Engle (17th District), Hinchey (26th), Maloney (14th), Nadler (8th), Owens (11th) and Velazquez (12th). Representatives will support this legislation only if they hear from their constituents! If you are in favor of H.R. 4618, begin by phoning or writing your representative, urging him/her to co-sponsor this legislation. (Note that legislators are obligated to respond only to written correspondence.) If the response is unsatisfactory you might

proceed by making an appointment for two or three people to meet with your representative, or with his/her chief of staff at one of the offices in your district. Locations and phone numbers for representative's offices can be obtained from your local League of Women Voters. Bring signed petitions, news clips and written information about the bill to this meeting. Should your representative continue to oppose the bill, contact one of your representative's offices and obtain the representative's schedule of campaign appearances. When attending a campaign event, arrive with a few other people shortly before the event begins and distribute leaflets about the bill. Leaflets and petition sheets are available from The Pure Food Campaign which can be reached at (202) 775-1132, or at email address: campaign@igc.apc.org. "Town meetings," where audience members can ask questions of the representative, are good opportunities for educating the public about the rBGH labeling issue, and for making the candidate take a public stand on the matter.

On a related note, Rep. Sanders (I-VT) has joined with Reps. George Brown (D-CA) and David Obey (D-WI) in requesting a General Accounting Office (GAO) review of potential conflicts and biases at the FDA, in addition to precedent-setting decisions regarding "manageable risk" made during the FDA review of Monsanto's rBGH. Persons alleged to have committed ethics violations include

- Michael R. Taylor, FDA Deputy Commissioner, who shaped the agency's policy on rBGH. Until the summer of 1991, Taylor had been a leading attorney in Washington, DC, representing Monsanto and the International Food Biotechnology Council. As an attorney Taylor specialized in food labeling and regulatory issues.

- Dr. Margaret Miller, Deputy Director of the FDA's Office of New Animal Drugs, who wrote the FDA's opinion on why milk from rBGH-treated cows should not be labeled. Miller also developed the FDA's policy rationale on antibiotics in milk that provided the basis for FDA's approval of rBGH. Before coming to the FDA, Miller conducted research for Monsanto on rBGH. According to charges made by her coworkers, Miller was still publishing papers on rBGH with Monsanto scientists at the time she made policy recommendations on rBGH at the FDA.

- Susan Sechen, who apparently worked on the rBGH issue as a data reviewer at FDA while still involved with her previous job conducting research on rBGH for Monsanto at Cornell University. Sechen is alleged to have played a key role in defending Monsanto's rBGH product at the FDA.

- The legislators also asked the GAO to investigate charges of (1) "employee intimidation and endangerment of the public health" in the FDA's Office of New Animal Drug Evaluation, and (2) the firing of FDA whistleblower, Dr. Richard Burroughs, who had gone public with charges of excessive influence on the approval process by rBGH manufacturers.

For additional information about H.R. 4618 you can call the Washington office of Rep. Sanders at (202) 225-4115.

Mike Hudak is the Binghamton area coordinator for The Pure Food Campaign.