

March 11, 2009

Dear Member of Congress,

We are writing to voice our concern about the quality and safety of the food served to children in schools. We represent parents, consumers, farmers, health professionals, teachers and food service providers from across the country.

We request that Congress include language in the Child Nutrition Act stating that schools participating in the National School Lunch Program and other federal feeding programs can purchase milk that is free of artificial hormones, as long as standard competitiveness procedures are followed. This is a no-cost administrative change that would help schools make choices that respond to the needs of their students, parents and communities.

The Child Nutrition Act is designed to help meet the nutritional needs of children through the National School Lunch Program and other feeding programs. As Congress prepares to reauthorize this vital piece of legislation before it expires on September 30, 2009, we urge you to provide adequate resources to meet the growing need for these feeding programs. We also believe that the reauthorization process offers an opportunity to address long-standing concerns about the staples of school lunch programs – milk and dairy products.

According to the National Milk Producers Federation, in fiscal year 2005-2006, 430 million gallons of milk were distributed through the school breakfast, lunch and special milk programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 15.2 percent of all dairies in the United States and 42.7 percent of industrial dairies treat their cows with an artificial growth hormone called recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH). Therefore, it is possible that at least 84 million gallons of milk from rBGH-treated cows were distributed through the school nutrition programs in fiscal year 2005-2006 -- or about one out of five pints of milk offered in school cafeterias nationwide. This is a significant amount of milk from cows treated with a controversial and unnecessary artificial hormone.

The controversy over the use of rBGH has persisted since it was approved in 1994. Injections of rBGH increase the presence of another hormone, called insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1), in the cow and the cow's milk. Studies by the European Commission and others indicate that IGF-1 survives cow digestion and pasteurization, which is troubling because high levels of IGF-1 in humans is linked to increased rates of colon, breast and prostate cancer. When the Food and Drug Administration approved rBGH, it did not thoroughly investigate this risk. The Canadian health agency, Health Canada, reviewed existing research on rBGH in 1998 and noted, "Simply not enough is known about how IGF-1 functions to properly evaluate the potential health impacts [of rBGH]."

While much additional research is needed to clarify the relationship between rBGH and the increased presence of IGF-1 in humans, vulnerable school-age children should not be subjected to this unnecessary risk in the meantime.

Another major concern with the use of rBGH in dairy production is the impact on cows' health. In particular, rBGH increases the rate of mastitis, a bacterial udder infection, and in turn increases the use of antibiotics like penicillin on dairy cows. The overuse of antibiotics is already a serious problem in the livestock industry and is linked to new strains of resistant "superbugs" that decrease antibiotic effectiveness and put human health at serious risk. Prominent health organizations, including the American Public Health Association and the American Medical Association, have criticized the overuse of antibiotics in animal production.

Growing consumer concern about the use of rBGH in milk production has led to dramatic changes in the dairy industry, with major dairies and retailers going rBGH-free. In the last few years, Tillamook Cheese, Garelick Farms, Darigold, Hood and many other dairy brands have eliminated artificial hormones from their milk supply. Large retailers including Kroger, Publix and WalMart have switched their house brand of milk to rBGH-free. Dean Foods, the largest milk producer in the nation, is adopting rBGH-free policies at many of their bottling plants. A growing number of hospitals and colleges are switching as well.

School food services should have the same option. School cafeterias must not become a dumping ground for milk that increasingly does not have an outlet in the retail market. School children deserve milk that is produced without controversial products like rBGH, and school food service directors deserve clear guidance on their right to request rBGH-free milk if it best meets the needs of their districts.

Due to concern about the impact of rBGH on human and animal health, most of the world's industrialized countries -- including Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union -- do not allow the use of rBGH. Codex Alimentarius, the United Nations' food safety standards setting body, has twice decided that it could not endorse the safety of rBGH for human health.

U.S. children deserve the protection afforded to children in other industrialized countries. Until FDA adopts a precautionary approach to rBGH, local school systems should have the option to procure milk from cows not treated with this controversial artificial growth hormone.

The Child Nutrition Act has historically served as a way to prevent hunger in our nation's school children. It is critical that the food children eat at school not cause them harm. We invite you to support children's health by supporting a provision in the CNA that states that school food services have the option to request rBGH-free milk and organically produced milk, as long as standard competitiveness procedures are followed.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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