



Milk Matters

a column by Joseph O'Donnell

'Safety first' more than a mantra

Food safety is an essential part of every day life; after all eating is something we all do – many times throughout the day. Generally, we think very little about food safety, it's just assumed that the food we eat is safe, and rightfully so.

Protecting the food we eat starts with production and carries through to the dinner table – no matter what kind of food it is. Food production, processing and delivery technology in the United States today makes food poisoning the exception now rather than the rule, but where did it all begin? Throughout history, the most effective pressure on food systems to become safe and remain that way has come from consumers. There are numerous examples of how consumers will run, not walk, from any food they think will make them sick. It is not only the feared consequences of eating tainted products but the very real fact that consumers, especially in the U.S., have a myriad of options. If you put risky beans in front of a starving man, they will be eaten. In places where few go hungry, consumers will move on to less risky food choices.

Heavy scrutiny

Apples, strawberries, chicken ... and of course, because of Mad Cow Disease, beef have all endured heavy scrutiny by consumers concerned over safety. In the recent BSE (Mad Cow) scare, the export market for beef suffered considerably, but why not the domestic market? While I'm no marketing guru, I'm sure the quick response by the USDA to reassure the public about the safety of beef was a key factor in its resilience at home. Another positive response came from the government agencies that stepped forward to let consumers know that the BSE organism has never been found in milk. While it sounds like a no-brainer, it was an important step. Consumers have confidence in these agencies and, as a result, dairy was not seriously affected by the BSE incident.

BSE was a definite wake-up call, though, to all food producers and brings up a serious question – what other bugs are out there in our cattle population that could become a consumer issue? More importantly, what are we doing to control and test for them?

Milk producers recognize the threat disease-causing pathogens pose to their markets. After all, food safety incidents have put many commodity producers out of business throughout the years and they know milk is not immune. Throughout the U.S., veterinary schools, land grant universities and government labs are work-

ing hard to identify and test for these pathogens, develop on-farm management techniques to control them as well as processing techniques to kill them should they get into milk. The bottom line is, consumers don't want food from sick animals – nor should they. Look at consumer reaction to the notion that "downer" cows could be marketed. Once this became a consumer issue, the USDA ended the practice immediately. Dairy products have a healthy image. We need to make sure this image is protected and maintained in not only theory but practice as well.

Education materials aimed at controlling on-farm pathogens are currently available to producers and more are on the way. These materials were developed not simply as a government program but as a proactive response by groups of producers who recognized a need and made it happen. They compiled resources within the producer community, such as commodity boards, and worked with the universities and agencies that could get the work done in the most efficient manner.

These producer inspired efforts go beyond education to include research into techniques for better pathogen detection; management practices to eradicate or protect herds from pathogens; vaccines and medicines to cure or prevent diseases; and programs where producers who demonstrate compliance with regulations face reduced fees and the possibility of no new regulations. It's all about dairymen working hand-in-hand to protect their markets by protecting consumers.

An attitude seldom seen

The dairymen I've worked with have an attitude seldom seen with producers of other commodities. They believe it is their responsibility to improve the nutritional status of the global population by producing a very special product – milk. After all, milk is the only product designed by nature herself for the exclusive purpose of delivering health and nutrition. Putting this responsibility at risk by producing a product that doesn't meet the standards for wholesomeness expected from our consumers not only loses a sale but also reduces the confidence in dairy products as a whole.

Each day, as we learn more about milk and its composition, we are able to do more to make it healthier and safer for consumers. Research, collaboration and cooperation are key and the industry is taking charge to make "Safety First" a reality, not just a slogan. ■



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