

BGH: Monsanto and the Dairy Industry's Dirty Little Secret

By Dawn Stephans, Nutritionist & Founder of Dog Mountain Bakery

Seven years ago, Feb. 4, 1994, despite nationwide protests by consumer groups, Monsanto and the FDA forced onto the US market the world's first GE animal drug, recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH, sometimes known as rBST).

BGH is a powerful GE drug produced by Monsanto which, injected into dairy cows, forces them to produce 15%-25% more milk, in the process seriously damaging their health and reproductive capacity.

Despite warnings from scientists, such as Dr. Michael Hansen from the Consumers Union and Dr. Samuel Epstein from the Cancer Prevention Coalition, that milk from rBGH injected cows contains substantially higher amounts of a potent cancer tumor promoter called IGF-1, and despite evidence that rBGH milk contains higher levels of pus, bacteria, and antibiotics, the FDA gave the hormone its seal of approval, with no real pre-market safety testing required.

Moreover, the FDA ruled, in a decision marred by rampant conflict of interest (several key FDA decision makers, including Michael Taylor, previously worked for Monsanto), that rBGH-derived products did not have to be labeled, despite polls showing that 90% of American consumers wanted labeling -- mainly so they could avoid buying rBGH-tainted products.

All of the major criticisms leveled against rBGH have turned out to be true. Since 1994, every industrialized country in the world, except for the US, has banned the drug.

In 1998, Canadian government scientists revealed that Monsanto's own data on feeding rBGH to rats, carefully concealed by the company and the FDA, indicated possible cancer dangers to humans.

Since rBGH was approved, approximately 40,000 small and medium-sized US dairy farmers, 1/3 of the total in the country, have gone out of business, concentrating milk production in the hands of industrial-sized dairies, most of whom are injecting their cows with this cruel and dangerous drug.

In a 1998 survey by Family Farm Defenders, it was found that mortality rates for cows on factory dairy farms in Wisconsin, those injecting their herds with rBGH, were running at 40% per year. In other words, after two and a half years of rBGH injections most of these drugged and supercharged cows were dead.

Typically, dairy cows live for 15-20 years.

Alarmed and revolted by rBGH, consumers have turned in droves to organic milk and dairy products or to brands labeled as rBGH-free. Nonetheless, use of the drug has continued to increase in the US (and in nations like Brazil and Mexico) especially in large dairy herds, so

that currently 15% of America's 10 million lactating dairy cows are being injected with rBGH.

Compounding the problem of rBGH contamination, most of the nation's 1500 dairy companies are allowing the co-mingling of rBGH and non-rBGH milk, thereby contaminating 80-90% of the nation's milk and dairy supply (including all of the major infant formula brands). For a list of organic and rBGH-free dairies in the US consult the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) website.

The major reason that rBGH is still on the market is that it is not labeled. Supermarket dairy managers, following guidelines circulated by the rBGH and biotech lobby, routinely lie to consumers, telling them either that rBGH is not in their products, or that there's no way to tell, and reassuring them that the FDA has certified that rBGH is safe.

Of course, every survey conducted since 1994 shows that if consumers were given a choice, they would boycott rBGH-tainted products.

Responding to the global controversy surrounding the drug, Monsanto put BGH for sale in 1998, but there were no takers. Transnational PR firms working with the biotech industry have categorized Monsanto's handling of the rBGH controversy as a "public relations disaster."

Starbucks has been a target as 3/4 of the 32 million gallons of milk it buys every year in the US are coming from dairies that allow cows to be injected with rBGH.

Once Starbucks' 15 million customers learn that most of the latte or cappuccino drinks they're paying top dollar for (3/4 of the volume of these drinks are milk) contain an extra dose of pus, antibiotics, and growth hormones and that Fair Trade and organic coffee constitute less than one percent of company sales, they may decide to take their business elsewhere.

Total annual sales for the company are approximately \$2.5 billion.

The worst nightmare of Monsanto and the biotech industry is starting to materialize: a mass-based consumer and environmental marketplace pressure campaign in the heartland of GE foods-North America.

A number of major US food companies are already responding to public pressure and starting to sweep GE foods off their products lists and their grocery shelves: Gerber (baby food), Heinz (baby food), Frito-Lay (at least for their corn), Whole Foods, Wild Oats, Trader Joe's, and even McDonald's (at least for their French fries).

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