

Farm groups react to "no" vote

HARRISBURG — Wednesday was full of shocks and surprises for many farm organizations and dairy leaders as they learned the final decision made by farmers in rejecting for the third time in several years a milk marketing program in Pennsylvania.

Just minutes after Secretary of Agriculture Penrose Hallowell made the public announcement that the milk referendum was defeated, State Grange spokesperson Linda Blake confessed that the news was "gravely disappointing."

"This was something we worked very hard for," she explained, referring to the time spent by the state's oldest farm organization in helping to develop and promote the proposed milk marketing program.

Speaking for Pennsylvania

Farmers' Association president Keith Eckel, spokesman Wilson Smeltz expressed PFA's "profound disappointment" with the rejection vote. He shared Eckel's belief that evidently many dairymen still don't think the challenges of declining fluid sales, increasing competition, imitation products and imports are as urgent as our organization's leaders believe. However these challenges must still be met and our organization will continue to search for ways to improve the economic position of Pennsylvania's dairymen.

However, one farm organization's representative expressed his group's pleasure with the voting results. James Graci of the Pennsylvania Farmers' Union said he "looks at the referendum's defeat" as a big

victory for Farmers' Union.

"There were two sides to the story in this dairy referendum," said Graci. "Farmers' Union presented farmers with the other side and created conversation."

Graci noted that the real victory was won by the individual farmers who voted "no" on the milk tax question. Reasons why the referendum was voted down, said Graci, included the fact that the

program would have established a mandatory checkoff of 10 cents per hundredweight from the farmers' milkchecks.

"Advertising should not be a production cost to the dairy farmer," he stated. "It should be a cost that's passed on to the consumer."

The PFU spokesman also emphasized the proposed milk marketing program in Pennsylvania would have been a statewide program trying to solve a nationwide problem.

PFU, recognized as one of the major opponents to the proposed

program, is in full support of a national dairy proposal which advocates a production base dairy program and an equitable support program (see related story). Here in Pennsylvania, Graci said, PFU plans to work toward getting rid of bloc voting on future referendums. And, he added, the organization will attempt to change the present law that says money can't be checked back to co-ops for brand advertising.

Despite PFU's aggressive stand against the referendum, Graci admitted he was only "cautiously

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Dairy farmers say "no"

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dairy farmers are in fact very interested in the dairy marketing situation."

In giving reasons why the farmers rejected the milk marketing program, Hallowell cited current economic conditions which are of grave concern to dairy producers.

"The promotion program would have been a long-range benefit. It probably could not have turned things around in a month or two. Farmers may be looking at the short-range problem of the need for dollars and putting off in hoping that something else will happen to help the long-range situation," he explained.

He also listed the proposed national milk marketing referendum as being a factor. "Many farmers expressed concern about our money in Pennsylvania supporting dairy products from other states and other countries," Hallowell remarked.

Hallowell noted more farmers are opting out of the established federal milk marketing program and requesting a refund of their contributions which he said indicates their concern about being able to pay their farm bills and stretching their milk checks.

One other negative factor Hallowell attributed to influencing the dairy farmers' votes was U.S. Secretary of Agriculture John Block's May 5 announcement of proposed legislation that "could conceivably, dramatically change the position of the U.S. (dairy price) support program."

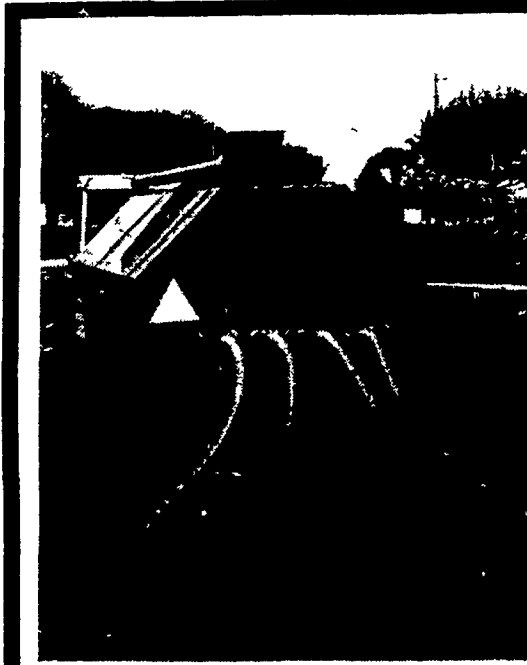
"Based on the information they had, farmers felt it was not financially the time or that they had the ability to make that contribution at this time," Hallowell observed.

The secretary did not consider the fact that the proposed milk marketing program was limited to generic advertising as a significant reason for its defeat.

"Farmers were uncertain of the results of any advertising," he said, pointing out that milk consumption has dropped despite federal generic and cooperative brand advertising. "There was not a strong belief that the promotion dollar would buy a dollar and ten cents back."

Hallowell pledged his department's continuing efforts to work with the dairy industry to seek alternatives and solutions to the problems of increased production and decreased consumption of milk products. He announced he will be calling a meeting of the state's dairy leaders within the next few weeks.

Will there be another attempt at a milk marketing referendum? According to Hallowell, no one within the dairy industry has requested it. However, he indicated that if the request for another referendum was made, it would not necessarily mean it too would be doomed to failure. He added once the national programs are "settled down" and farmers have "more stability," it may be appropriate to try again.

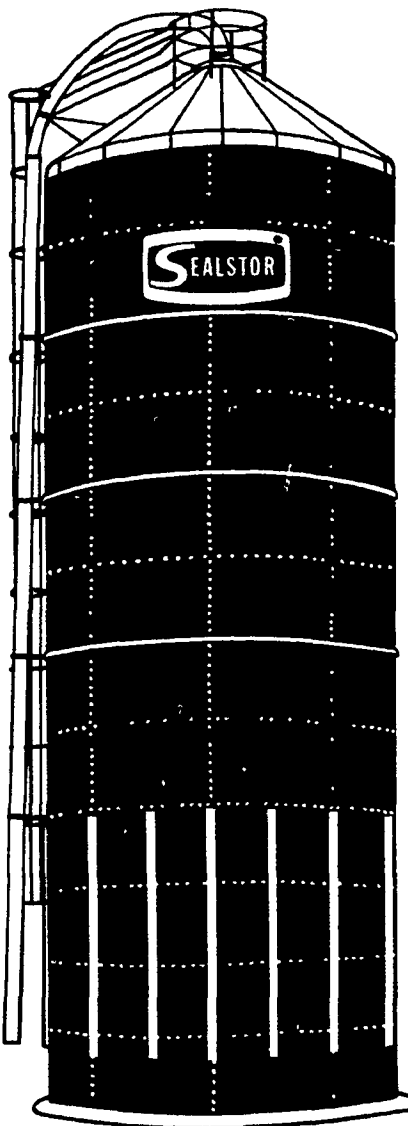


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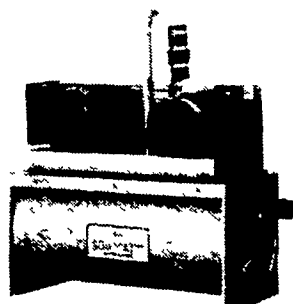
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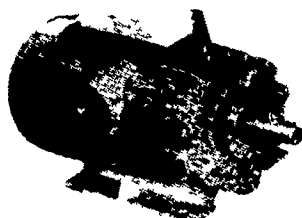
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