

Reaction Muted To Latest Milk Safety Development

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tor for the Washington-based National Milk Producers Federation, said she has received very few phone calls about a recently released government study of the issue and almost none from the general media.

That contrasts sharply with the response last January, after the "Wall Street Journal" ran a front-page report that questioned the safety of the nation's milk supply based on the detection of minute levels of certain drug residues in retail milk samples.

The government study — "Food Safety and Quality: FDA Surveys Not Adequate to Demonstrate Safety of Milk Supply" — was issued by the General Accounting Office, a research organization set up to serve Congress. Although the GAO study criticized several surveys by the Food and Drug Administration (the federal agency that oversees the public health aspects of the dairy industry), it did not directly question the safety of the milk supply.

"The main thrust of the GAO report is aimed at criticizing FDA, not at criticizing the industry," said John Adams, the federation's director of regulatory affairs. It is concerned largely with such technical matters as the merits of particular residue tests and the level of FDA tolerances for various chemicals.

Nevertheless, Adams added, the industry, including individual farmers, still needs to do more to prevent residues of antibiotics and other drugs. Toward that end, the federation continues to pursue a means of distributing a recently developed "quality assurance pro-

ocol" to dairymen and veterinarians.

The latest developments can be regarded as a continuation of the controversy spawned by the Journal article. The article detailed the results of two studies, done concurrently but independently, by the paper and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington-based consumer lobby. Each of the studies turned up evidence in retail milk samples of very low levels of contamination by drug residues, including sulfamethazine, which has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory tests involving rats and mice.

FDA subsequently conducted its own survey and declared that the milk supply was safe, although it too turned up some low-level residues. The GAO study was requested by New York congressman Ted Weiss, whose House subcommittee examined the conflicting claims.

In response to the GAO criticism, the FDA has announced plans to launch a continuous nationwide monitoring program in 1991. Adams said the program is designed to be able to track any problems that might be detected back to the farmers, veterinarians, or dairies responsible.

Meanwhile, National Milk is pressing ahead with plans to implement its residue avoidance program, developed in conjunction with the American Veterinary Medical Association, despite a decision by the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board not to help fund the program.

The two groups brought together a panel of experts to develop the 10-point protocol, which

farmers and veterinarians can follow to minimize any possibility that they might ship milk with drug residues, Adams said. Among other things, the protocol calls for farmers to test milk before resuming the marketing of milk from any treated cow, using tests specific for each drug.

Federation officials have been talking with representatives from other interested parties, including drug companies and the Cooperative Extension Service, in hopes of forming a group to promote use of the protocol. "If we are successful in forming some sort of a consortium, we think we'll be able to generate enough money to deliver the materials," Adams said.

Initial plans had called for the protocol to be explained at a series

of regional meetings to state regulators, Extension leaders, and industry officials who, in turn, could explain it at a series of local meetings. Now, however, the various parties hope to interest someone in developing a packet of educational materials that could be sold at cost directly to interested farmers and veterinarians, Adams said.

Farmers are probably somewhat confused by the whole affair, inasmuch as many of them already have taken steps to avoid residue problems. All of the cooperatives operating in the mid-Atlantic area penalize farmers found to ship contaminated milk and reward those without violations.

Nevertheless, the controversy persists in the public health arena,

fueled at least in part by increasingly sophisticated tests able to detect residues in astronomically tiny amounts. The sulfonamide residues found in the Journal survey, for instance, were estimated to range from 5-10 parts per billion.

Whether or not such low levels constitute a real health risk, federation officials remain committed to the need for more action by producers. Adams said dairy farmers have a window of opportunity to adopt a residue prevention program on a voluntary basis.

"If we don't," he said, "then my concern would be that we will face more regulations in the future and more regulations that don't fit particular operations and create excess work."

Mastitis Mumbo Jumbo Cleared Up

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and contact with contaminated milk.

Environmental mastitis is caused by germs in the cows' surroundings. Environmental mastitis is a nice way to say the origin of the mastitis was due to manure, dirty water, or filth.

Chronic infections are long lasting and often do not respond to treatment. An example of chronic mastitis is Staph aureus with recurring clinical episodes.

Acute mastitis is often found when cows are exposed to high numbers of environmental bacteria and suddenly become very sick. Some may actually die. This form of mastitis is often caused by coliform type bacteria.

However, the most important

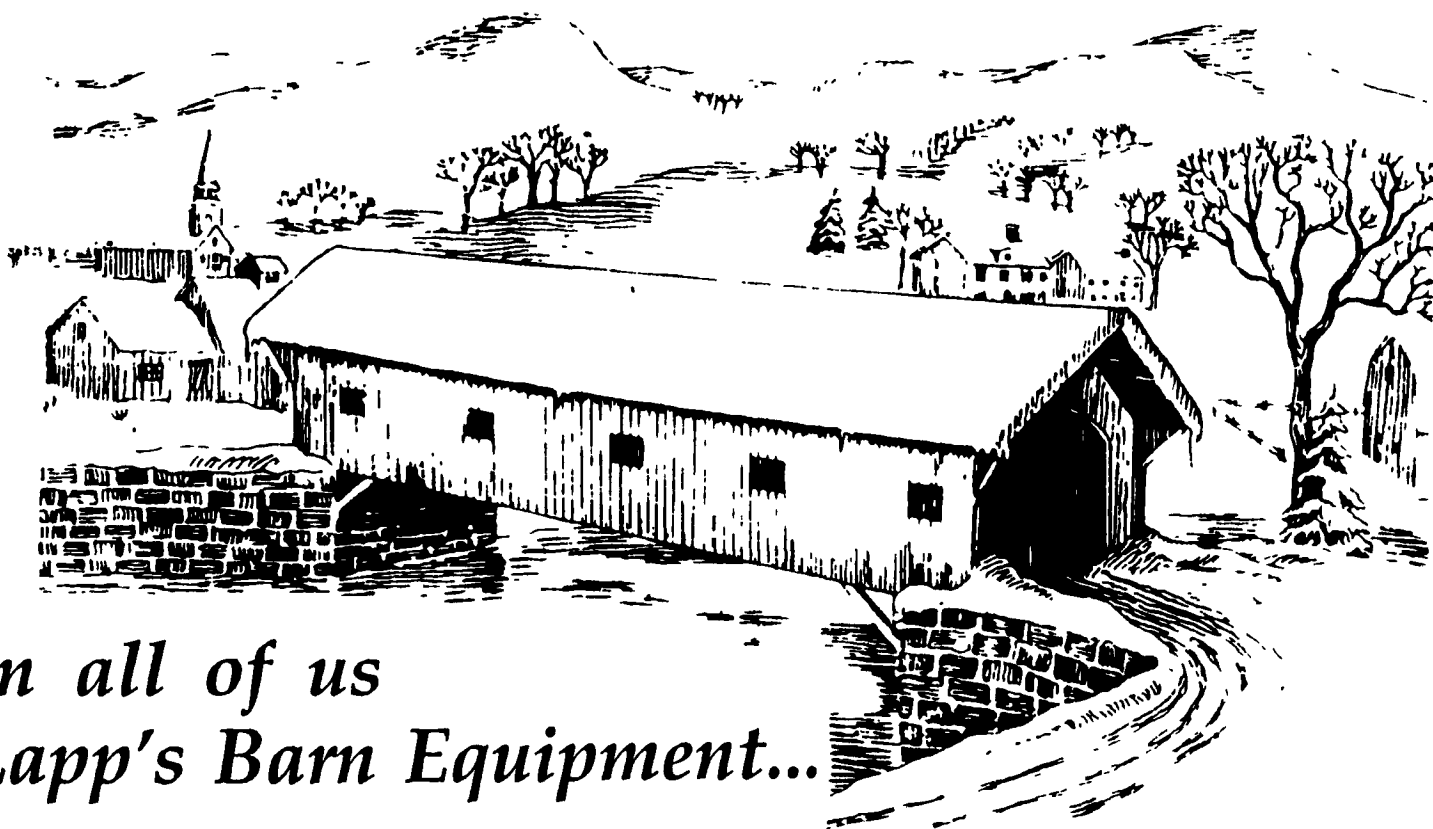
form of mastitis is subclinical. These are infections that cannot be detected at cowside but cause 70 percent of the mastitis dollar loss due primarily to lost milk production. They are found using somatic cell counting (SCC) or the CMT test.

Efforts to control subclinical mastitis involve knowing each cow's SCC, preventing the spread of contagious germs between

cows, reducing the number of environmental germs on the cow (keeping cows clean), and knowing when the incidence of new subclinical infections is rising.

Dry cow therapy and teat dipping are the most powerful tools in the mastitis control arsenal to combat subclinical and contagious infections. Clean and dry are the key to prevention of environmental cases.

Merry Christmas



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