

Pork Checkoff, Under Fire, Will Undergo Referendum

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff

EPHRATA (Lancaster Co.) — Monday last week, USDA Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman announced that a referendum would be conducted on the pork checkoff.

USDA is reacting to a coalition calling itself the Campaign for Family Farms, comprised of rural groups in several states, and other entities, who were tasked to come up the required amount of signatures — 15 percent of bona fide pork producers — to allow the referendum, according to the Pork Act and Order passed by Congress in 1985.

A full-page ad appeared in the New York Times on Feb. 28, "America's last family farms?", which listed almost two dozen organizations that support the referendum. The ad was put together by the Turning Point Project, based in Washington, D.C., and includes Farm Aid, Center for Food Safety, the Humane Society, the Land Institute, Rodale Institute, Grassroots International, Earth-Save International, Pesticide Action Network, and others, which identified commodity checkoff programs and who come out strongly against what they call "factory farms." These groups support the petition drive, according to In Motion Magazine.

But if the checkoff is voted out, the councils will have to revert to the all-volunteer checkoff that existed the first 20 years. Then, about 60 percent of the producers contributed to the voluntary checkoff. Losing almost half the money to operate "is certainly going to have an impact on the program for producers," Reinecker said.

The checkoff, he said, benefits the smaller producers in many ways. The larger producers, the Murphys and Smithfields, are big enough that their own promotional and educational programs can continue.

According to Herb Schick, secretary-treasurer of the PPPC, the 80 nonprofit organizations that support the New York Times ad came up with 18,000 signatures. But according to the Pork Act, the signatures must be from bona fide producers — and many signatures were not valid.

"Are they pork producers?" said Schick. "Are they farmers?"

Schick noted that he has not personally spoke to any producer who doesn't want the checkoff, a mandatory program that allows all producers to be part of a "fair and equitable system that provides them with programs in the areas of research, education, and promotion," according to the umbrella organization of PPPC, the

NPPC. The program was voted into existence by producers in 1988.

The only money for operating expenses for the PPPC — a group that also promotes pork — comes from the checkoff. The rest is raised by the group itself at auctions such as the one conducted at the group's annual Pork Expo.

The reason for the referendum, Schick believes, is because of the low prices the industry suffered in 1998-1999.

"I don't see why they are placing the blame on the Pork Council," he said. The voluntary organization helps producers throughout the state in education, research, and other areas to promote pork.

But the referendum may force more communication. "We need to get our act together and show the producers we've done a good job," Schick said.

In the February 2000 Pigs Pen, a newsletter from PPPC, the Pork The Other White Meat campaign is driving positive attitudes. "More U.S. consumers have favorable opinions of pork in recent years thanks, in part, to the producer-funded" advertising and promotion campaign, according to the article.

The survey found 87 percent of the Americans who have seen or heard about pork through the promotional campaign are

"much more likely to think favorably about pork in all areas, from taste to nutritional value. Eighty percent of consumers aware of the campaign also reported they would most likely be eating pork within the next month, compared to 60 percent of consumers unaware of the pork campaign."

The article noted that 56 percent of consumers surveyed this year have a favorable opinion about pork, up from 47 percent of 1993. The campaign is funded from the checkoff.

In 1999, \$20.9 million, or 57 percent of the national pork checkoff dollars, were invested in domestic demand enhancement programs. USDA is forecasting U.S. pork consumption for 1999 at 53.9 pounds per person, 1.3 pounds higher than last year and the highest per-capita consumption since 1981.

At the recent National Pork Industry Forum conducted early this month in Kansas City, Mo., pork producer delegates overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for USDA to develop and implement an open, fair, transparent, and cost-effective voting procedure for the pork checkoff referendum.

Barb Determan, producer delegate from Early, Iowa, and president-elect of the NPPC, said producer representatives

attending the Pork Forum wanted to send a strong, unified voice to USDA.

"Producer-delegates want USDA to enact rules allowing all bona fide producers and importers to have the right to vote based upon documented proof they have sold hogs and paid the checkoff during the representative time period, not to exceed 12 months prior to the date of the vote," she said.

NPPC intends to work with USDA and Congress to ensure a fair voting process be in place for the referendum.

NPPC represents 85,000 U.S. pork producers in 44 affiliated state associations, including PPPC. The checkoff amounts to \$500 million annually.

According to the National Farmers Organization, U.S. producers paid nearly all of the \$600 million used to fund commodity research and promotion programs last year.

The pork checkoff requires hog producers to pay 45 cents for every \$100 of hog sales.

According to an article in The Telegraph Herald, Dubuque, Iowa, in January 1999, 14,000 hog farmers had signed the petition, and about 21,000 signatures were needed.

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David Reinecker, president of the Pennsylvania Pork Producers Council (PPPC), noted that member-producers of the PPPC are concerned that the rules be followed. Fifteen percent of bona fide pork producers have to sign the petition for a referendum in order to have a vote on the checkoff.

Though the list may have been incomplete, and filled with what critics are saying has duplicate names and those who don't even produce pork, Glickman proceeded with his OK of the vote. According to Reinecker, the issue may be if these rules are not followed, and the referendum is called for anyway, "what other rules are they going to suspend?" he said.

"Who gives the secretary of agriculture the power to override rules?" said Reinecker.

PPPC and National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) members are concerned that the voting is equitable and fair and follows the rules outlined in the Pork Act. But so far, the voting on the referendum itself has been "really, really, really flawed," Reinecker said.

The date itself for the vote on the referendum is undetermined.

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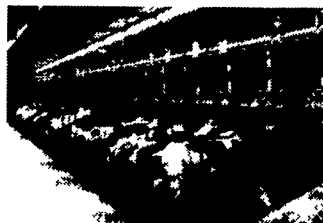
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