

Raw Milk

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ing lively applause from the crowd of 170 people.

Interest in raw milk is growing among both dairy farmers and consumers, according to raw milk advocates and ag officials who gathered Monday at the Lancaster Farm and Home Center. The meeting was organized by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA).

The group heard details about the permitting process for raw milk sales, discussions on the health benefits of raw milk and its products, and stories from two out-of-state dairymen who market them.

"The whole movement is basically about honesty," said Tim Wightman, organic dairy producer from Wisconsin.

Wightman has struggled for several years to find a way to sell his raw milk in Wisconsin, a state that bans the outright sale of raw milk or its products. Eventually, after spending \$35,000 in legal fees and losing an estimated \$100,000 in income, Wightman was able to form a limited liability corporation that allows con-

sumers to buy shares in the farm. Since the raw milk and products can be legally consumed by owners of the farm, the arrangement is approved by law.

Wightman said that Pennsylvania farmers have a long history of direct marketing and are fortunate to having a raw milk permitting process.

Pennsylvania's policy allows farmers to sell fluid raw milk and hard cheese with a permit. However, selling products made from raw milk, such as butter, yogurt, and soft cheese, is prohibited.

"You actually have a state-sponsored raw milk program," Wightman said. "Don't let it go away."

Wightman has his milk tested routinely for disease-carrying organisms and posts results for customers to see. He urged farmers to take an active role in assuring milk quality for consumers, including making sure their cows are certified Johnes-free.

"Big companies can never match the job you do at controlling milk quality," he said.

In Wightman's system, consumers "certify" the product by coming on the farm, seeing how it is produced, and talking to the farmer.

"That's called America — freedom of choice."

Wightman said "people are coming out of the woodwork" to buy raw milk and products such as artisan cheeses. Across the country, "we revere things that are handmade because nobody does it anymore."

Mark McAfee, California dairy producer, told his story from a state that allows raw milk sales. McAfee of Organic Pastures Dairy sells raw milk and its products in 325 stores throughout California, and has even shipped colostrum (milk from newly-calved cows) to countries around the world.

"Raw milk has never been banned (in California)," McAfee said, "although there's a tremendous number of hoops to go through to sell raw milk on the shelf."

The health benefits of raw milk are becoming better-known, according to McAfee. He pointed out increasing claims that problems such as autism, asthma, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) are alleviated by a diet that includes raw milk and/or its products.

Immunity can also be increased by drinking raw milk and colostrum, McAfee said. Colostrum from his cows was shipped to Asian countries to help protect health workers during the SARS outbreak.

Before the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, Navy Seals in southern California were "drinking the heck out of our raw milk and colostrum" to bolster their immune systems against foreign diseases they might encounter in the Middle East, McAfee said.

Raw milk contains compounds that act as safety mechanisms and kill disease-carrying organisms. Pasteurization actually inactivates these compounds, according to McAfee.

As long as the milk is clean from the start, "these (safety mechanisms) keep raw milk safe," he said.

McAfee referred to recent studies at the University of California-Davis which show that pathogens do not survive when added to raw milk from his farm.

Producing that kind of raw milk means the cows have to be grass-fed, kept in a clean, stress-free environment, and not given antibiotics, he said.

"The reason you don't have pathogens in this milk is that you've changed the internal physiology of the cow (from the conventional system)," McAfee

said. "It's really not organic — it's more than that."

McAfee believes selling raw milk is a way for dairy farmers to add a lot of value to their product. In California, he gets \$70 per hundredweight (about \$6 per gallon wholesale) for



Taylor Diaz asks why consumers have easy access to tobacco when raw milk products are so regulated.



Mark McAfee of California shares his experiences selling raw milk.

"Over the last few months, I've received what I'd call a warm welcome to the raw milk issue," McLean said, referring to calls to the PDA over a rumor that raw milk sales were being outlawed in the state.

The PDA's stance on raw milk is that "we're not trying to prevent anyone from getting anything that would be beneficial to their health," McLean said. "We want that product to be safe."

The law that prohibits retailing raw milk products such as butter and yogurt has been in effect since 1935. The PDA's job is to interpret the law and make sure it is being followed — not to change it, McLean said. In order for the law to be changed, a new version would have to be drafted and approved by the Pennsylvania legislature.

"We as a regulatory agency cannot turn our backs on the regulations that are in place."

As for raw milk itself, McLean said he recently tried a glass — and liked it.

Roy Malik explained the two types of permits for selling raw milk in the state: the customer-container permit and the pre-filled container permit.

The customer-container permit allows farmers to sell milk to customers who bring their own jugs. For farmers who have this type of permit, Malik recommended keeping clean, disposable plastic containers on hand, in case the customer needs one. The pre-filled container permit requires

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Maureen Diaz with son Wilson, 6 months, says it should be up to consumers to choose clean milk products.

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