

Bills seek to exclude plant-based drinks from 'milk' label

By **MICHELE F. MIHALJEVICH**
Indiana Correspondent

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Legislation introduced last month in both houses of Congress would require the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to follow its own rules regarding the labeling of what the bills call "misbranded milk alternatives."

The DAIRY PRIDE (Defending Against Imitations and Replacements of Yogurt, Milk and Cheese to Promote Regular Intake of Dairy Everyday) Act was introduced Jan. 12 by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.). Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) proposed a companion bill in the House on Jan. 31.

Both bills say the labeling of plant-based products as milk is misleading to consumers, a statement disputed by the American Soybean Assoc. (ASA) and the Soyfoods Assoc. of North America (SANA).

"This legislation is unnecessary, as no confusion in the market exists," said Ron Moore, ASA president, and Wendy Behr, SANA president. The two sent a letter Feb. 6 to leaders of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

"Consumers of soy milk clearly understand that the product is derived from soybeans rather than bovine milk, and a large percentage consume it for just that reason due to dietary choices or restrictions."

The letter asks the senators to "recognize the valuable role of the market in reflecting consumer choices and (urges) the committee to reject this attempt to restrict the ways in which our industry may market its product."

In announcing their bipartisan bill, Welch and several other lawmakers said the FDA would have 90 days

from enactment of the legislation to "issue guidance on how it will enforce the regulatory definition of milk as a product produced by a mammary gland."

The representatives added they objected to "the misleading practice of labeling as 'milk' a variety of plant-based products that do not have the unique attributes or nutritional value of real milk." Milk is defined by the FDA's Code of Federal Regulations as the lacteal secretion obtained by the complete milking of one or more healthy cows.

Baldwin's bill (S. 130) was referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Welch's legislation (H.R. 778) was sent to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

The dairy industry has been working on the labeling issue for several years, said Jackie Klippenstein, senior vice president of industry and legislative affairs for the Dairy Farmers of America.

"It's understandably frustrating," she said. "It's a growing problem. Companies put the word 'milk' on products that don't contain milk. A huge section of the dairy case is taken up with imitation products."

Consumers are aware of what they're drinking when they choose soy or almond products over dairy milk, Klippenstein said, but a bigger concern is that they may think those alternative products contain the same nutritional benefits. The practice of labeling non-dairy products with dairy terms violates current FDA rules and is unfair to dairy farmers and processors, Baldwin said in a Jan. 31 letter to President Trump.

"Although existing federal regulations are clear, previous FDA commissioners have failed to enforce these labeling regulations and the mislabeling of products has increased rapidly," she wrote. "Products made from

nuts, seeds, plants and algae do not provide the same nutritional profile as the dairy products they imitate, and they should not be able to use dairy's good name for their own profit."

The plant-based milk industry doesn't claim its products are nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk, said Michele Simon, executive director of the Plant Based Foods Assoc. "The nutrition argument is another desperate attempt by the dairy industry," she said. "It's easy to see the nutritional value of any plant-based product by looking at the label. Consumers (of plant-based products) are avid label readers. They care very much about what they're consuming."

People choose non-dairy milk products for a variety of reasons, including an inability to drink dairy milk or because they don't want saturated fat and cholesterol in their diets, Simon explained. There are also some who may stay away from dairy products because of stories regarding the treatment of cows.

"There's an increasing awareness of where our food comes from," she noted. "There's nothing natural about industrialized dairy production. It's so far from the quaint image of yesterday of the farmer milking a cow."

Sales of plant-based foods - beverages, meat substitutes, cheese and tofu - were about \$4.9 billion in 2016. Plant-based milk may be made from nuts such as almonds, cashews, macadamias and pecans. It may also come from rice and oats, as well as hemp and flax seed. Plant-based cheeses and yogurts are also available.

The goal of the plant-based foods industry is to come to a labeling agreement that appeases everyone, Simon said. "(The legislation) is a solution in search of a problem. But we do take it seriously. The legislation wasn't a surprise to me, but the tenor and baselessness of it was."

Illinois photo contest aims to pull dairy awareness into focus

By **TIM ALEXANDER**
Illinois Correspondent

PEORIA, Ill. — Just one week after opening the competition, reaction from students and teachers participating in the Peoria County Farm Bureau (PCFB) Ag in the Classroom (AIRC) program's dairy-focused photo contest are responding in encouraging numbers.

The contest, open to approximately 40 elementary schools in the Peoria School District through Feb. 28, carries the theme "What Does Dairy Look Like to You?" The classroom of the winning entrant will be treated to a field trip to Lin-

den Hill Dairy Farm in the spring, with all costs paid by Prairie Farms of Peoria.

"The hope for this photo contest is to really make the students think critically about where their dairy products come from and how much dairy they eat throughout the day," said Abbie Enlund, AIRC coordinator for the PCFB, who helped educators inform teachers in 218 Peoria area classrooms about the contest during January.

"Most of the students and teachers were very excited about this opportunity. Students asked a lot of questions about what they could include in the photo, and the early response has been very positive."

Enlund listed Illinois' dwindling public schools budget and the desire to reach out to urban youth in the city of Peoria about the importance of animal agriculture as two reasons she pursued the idea of a dairy photo contest for the Peoria AIRC program.

"First, I know how strapped school budgets are and for many schools, especially Peoria (School District) 150 schools, field trips have been almost completely cut from all budgets. Kids just don't get the out-of-school experiences they used to," she explained.

"I thought maybe with our contacts and connections to farmers in the community, we might be able to pull together enough support to sponsor a field trip. I was honored and elated when Prairie Farms said they would be willing to sponsor the whole thing, including bus-ing costs."

"Secondly, we work with students with very different lifestyles - from very ur-

ban kids that have never left the city or seen farm animals in person, to students that live and work daily on farms with their families. I thought how cool or interesting it might be to see the different perspectives of these kids on a topic like dairy. I thought the photos that came in might represent some of those lifestyle differences."

Farm World will publish the winning photo in its pages after the entrant and classroom are notified in early March, along with a photo or two from the winning class' field trip to Linden Hill Dairy Farm, located at 8412 W. Middle Road in Peoria.

With the field trip, "students will learn in a hands-on way what it takes to get the milk in their glass, lanolin in their lotion and eggs on their breakfast table," according to Enlund.

Those with questions about the photo contest should contact her at 309-686-7070.

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