

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### The 'bovine growth hormone' hoax

*Jeremy Rifkin is at it again—using scare tactics against farmers and consumers. This time the target is milk.*

In the week of Aug. 21, five U.S. supermarket chains (Kroger, Safeway, Supermarkets General, Stop and Shop, and Vons) and an ice cream maker announced that they would sell no dairy products made with milk from cows receiving a new synthetically produced growth hormone. The food companies cited no health threats, but rather claimed potential public disfavor.

The anti-technology fanatic Jeremy Rifkin appeared on national network TV Aug. 24 saying that unknown dangers lurked—such as potential allergic reactions in babies. The ice cream company, Ben and Jerry's, announced they would issue a new ice cream carton with an advertisement that the use of bovine growth hormone would drive family farms out of existence.

The Big Scare is on. But first, consider the scientific and economic facts. Some years ago, scientists succeeded in isolating the gene responsible for bovine growth hormone production. Researchers transferred the gene to ordinary bacteria, and then found that the altered bacteria can be reproduced on a large scale, allowing commercial production of the bovine growth hormone—called BGH (or BST, for bovine somatotropine, its technical name). Depending on what phase of lactation the cow is at when she receives the hormone, milk output can be increased by 10% to over 40% per cow.

The Food and Drug Administration has tested the drug, field tests have been under way for some time, and the hormone could be commercially

available in 1990. The results could be spectacular. According to the General Accounting Office's Report to Congress in 1985, "Cornell University's researchers believe the hormone's effects on dairy production would be immediate and major, similar to increased crop production caused by the widespread use of commercial fertilizer after World War II."

Vastly increased milk output could rapidly improve nutrition levels around the globe. Dairy products and additives are convenient sources of animal protein in the diet, and a convenient form of food relief. Right now there are severe regional shortages of fluid milk around the United States, the result of recent years of federal programs to deter milk output and pressure dairy farmers to quit. The infamous Dairy Herd Termination Program alone eliminated 1.3 million milk cows.

Moreover, dairymen on average are receiving about \$12 for every hundred pounds of milk produced, when their minimum costs average at least \$14, and their parity price (a fair price to cover costs and guarantee future productivity) is over \$22 per hundredweight.

This is a crisis situation for dairy farmers and consumers alike. Look at the milk problem for school children. House Agriculture Committee chairman Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.) issued a press release back in May, saying, "The Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Jack Parnall, has confirmed that due to reduced surplus production of dairy goods there will be far less milk and other dairy products to distribute

to school districts for use in lunch programs across the nation."

So, right on cue, just before school opens, a national scare campaign starts over the danger of increasing milk output through BGH. Who would be against providing milk for kids? The "zero population growth" lobby, for whom Jeremy Rifkin is a spokesman, is constantly mobilizing to prevent the development of technologies that would produce more food and feed people. A special wing of this lobby focuses on propagating myths about food purity and the need for "organic," or primitive, small farms to produce "pure" food. Behind these romantic purity campaigns are hard-core food cartel and international financial circles who do not want high-technology, independent family farms to thrive.

Jeremy Rifkin has made a specialty of attacking genetic engineering, and many other forms of advanced technology used in agriculture, military R&D, and other areas. Rifkin lined up a report to release in August—two weeks before schools opened—claiming potential dangers in milk from BGH, which was prepared by a Chicago-based environmentalist professor Dr. Samuel Epstein. Even FDA officials, not known for expediting safety recommendations for new drugs, call the Epstein report full of distortions.

Rifkin wrote to the supermarket chains early in August forewarning them that "the public" would be alarmed about BGH. Meantime, Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream had cartons all printed up to say that family farms would disappear if BGH were used to produce too much milk. The real issue is: Ben and Jerry, along with Nestlé, Unilever, and the other big-time milk cartel companies, don't want to pay farmers their due for milk, and don't want millions of children to have any.