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/THE FIRST WORD**Bovine Growth Hormone
and Pork-Barrel Politics**

We've never been terribly enthusiastic about bovine growth hormone (bGH, alias BST), and have had misgivings about it as a bellwether (or lightning-rod) product for biotechnology. Make no mistake: The public-safety campaign mounted against BST is specious. The data have persuaded us that BST-treated cows produce milk that is completely safe for human consumption, and it appears that the compound should not be harmful to cattle when administered in proper doses.

It just seems that BST is a product for which there is no clear need, and pitching productivity enhancers to dairy farmers awash in milk they can't sell seems all too much like selling ice to Eskimos. Opponents of biotechnology at any time in any place have seized upon one aspect of this, claiming in their lawyerly way that if BST is not bad for human health, and not bad for the cows' health, then it should be banned because it might... might... increase production, drive down prices, and push small dairymen out of business.

So now comes U.S. Senator Russell Feingold, Democrat of Wisconsin, tacking a moratorium on BST sales onto one of the most contentious and closely fought pieces of legislation in recent years, the Clinton administration's deficit reduction bill. For weeks, Feingold's amendment stalled final ratification of the act. Finally, in a bit of blatant horsetrading, it came down to Feingold's much-needed vote for the Clinton budget and administration acquiescence to a 90-day ban on BST sales, to commence upon BST's approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (Bethesda, MD).

In one sense, this development, ludicrous as it may seem (a multi-hundred-billion-dollar measure held up in wrangling over some \$15 million in presumptive government subsidies for assumed further surpluses), comes as a relief. At least the forum has moved out of the science-based regulatory agencies and into the legislative chambers and public debating halls where it belongs, and the opposition has, for the time being at least, dropped the rhetoric of health and safety for the franker terms of economic protectionism and special social pleading.

While they're at it, though, we suggest that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.) take a look at the impacts of automatic milking machines, higher-yielding strains of dairy cattle, and refrigeration—all of which tend to increase supplies and drive prices down. But why stop there? It's time to re-examine mechanical harvesting combines, crop rotation, fertilizer, and irrigation, all of which tend to increase production to the detriment of the small farmer.

BST, on the other hand, is equally available to the small farmer and the large. The amount required is strictly proportional to the number of cattle being treated, which is in turn dependent on the amount of land and feed available—so every farmer stands to benefit in strict proportion to the volume of business he was doing before adopting the hormone. Moreover, though BST seems to increase milk production substantially, it also adds to the total costs: there is the expense of the BST itself, and the labor needed to make the injections, and the cost of additional feed, and the perhaps infrequent costs of medical treatment or lost productivity attributable to even small increases in disease in the treated herd. In analyses we read long ago, the net increase in the farmer's profit per hundredweight of fresh milk was statistically significant, but small enough to leave room for individual choice. In the long run, the BST-using farmer's path to profit doesn't lie in producing more milk; it lies in producing the same amount of milk from fewer cows on less land for less cost.

Does anybody desperately need BST? That's questionable. But despite this, despite the absurd specter of human health problems, despite sometimes oafish efforts of would-be producers to rouse public or special-interest support, despite an epic example of political jawboning, BST deserves the right to compete—and, we think, fail—on the open market, without pork-barrel politics standing in its way.

—DOUGLAS K. MCCORMICK