



Texas Association of Dairymen

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SAFETY IS TOP CONCERN FOR DAIRY PRODUCERS

By John Cowan

With recent news reports about “mad cow” disease and theoretical bioterrorism scenarios, should consumers feel in danger when they visit the dairy aisle of their local supermarket?

The answer is a resounding “no.”

So far consumers don’t seem to be concerned about the safety of America’s food supply, and that’s as it should be. Dairy farmers take extremely seriously their responsibility to provide a safe and secure food supply. Still – if only for reassurance – I think it’s important for consumers to understand how the dairy industry is accomplishing this goal.

Food safety and security aren’t just a farmer’s desire to do his job well. The herd and the farm are also a significant investment and a source of livelihood. Therefore, farmers want to ensure their herd is healthy and their product is safe and of the highest quality.

Milk safety begins with the cow herself. New state importation rules guard against the outbreak of tuberculosis and other diseases on the farm. Strict standards govern how the herd is housed and what it can be fed.

The herd is frequently, regularly and thoroughly evaluated by trained veterinarians. Illnesses or other problems are quickly diagnosed and addressed before other cows are affected or the food supply is compromised.

Vigilance continues in the milking barn, which must meet strict sanitation standards and pass regular health inspections. A cow’s udder is disinfected prior to each time she is milked, and milking equipment is thoroughly cleaned both before and after each use. The milk is taken directly from the cow and placed into a refrigerated holding tank to preserve both freshness and ensure its safety.

From the time the milk leaves a cow, through transportation to the processing center, until it is finally bottled, the milk undergoes pasteurization and other processes designed to kill bacteria and protect quality. It is repeatedly and rigorously tested and monitored.

Dairy products are among the most tested and regulated foods in this country, and American dairy products are among the safest in the world.

While most food safety measures have been in place for a number of years, farmers in recent years also have been focusing on the security of the milk supply.

Since the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the dairy industry has been working closely with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other government agencies to safeguard the milk supply from a variety of possible threats.

The industry has adopted measures to secure both the milk supply and the processing facilities. For example, new methods to seal milk tankers make it evident if one is opened, unauthorized, before it arrives at a processing plant.

On the farm, dairy producers are more vigilant than ever about monitoring access to the farm, its facilities and the herd.

Milk and dairy products have been a vital part of the American diet since our country was founded. And generations of dairy farmers have made sure the food they produce is both healthy and safe. Today's dairy farmers, more than ever, are committed to continuing that tradition.

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