

FTC: Milk Ads Not Misleading
(THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

Federal regulators have turned down a request from Monsanto Co. to take action against dairy companies that advertise milk as free of synthetic hormones.

The Federal Trade Commission said last week that the ads it reviewed did not make any misleading claims about the safety of recombinant bovine somatotropin, or rBST, a hormone that boosts milk production in cows.

St. Louis based-Monsanto, which markets the hormone under the brand name Posilac, had asked the FTC to investigate more than a half dozen companies that advertise milk products.

The company claims the ads mislead consumers into thinking that milk from cows not treated with rBST are healthier or safer than dairy products from cows treated with the hormone.

The hormone is banned in Canada and Europe, mainly due to concerns that it leaves cows more prone to illness. But the Food and Drug Administration and the company insist the hormone is safe and the FDA approved rBST to boost production in dairy cows in 1993.

Still, many dairy farmers concerned about possible safety risks refuse to use the product and a growing number of retailers, including grocery chains Safeway and Kroger Co., have switched to milk free of synthetic hormones.

The national milk brand Borden, for example, advertises that "we work exclusively with farmers that supply 100 percent of our milk from cows that haven't been treated with artificial hormones. So, who do you trust when it comes to your family's milk?"

The FTC declined to launch a formal investigation or take enforcement action against any company. But FTC associate director Mary Engle said a few small businesses were warned about making unfounded claims about rBST on their Web sites and told to revise those claims.

The Center for Food Safety, a Washington-based nonprofit that opposes use of Posilac, applauded the FTC decision.

"Since more and more companies are rejecting this drug and letting consumers know it, Monsanto is getting desperate," said Charles Margulis, spokesman for the Center for Food Safety in Oakland, Calif.

Monsanto alleges that misleading advertising has created an artificial demand and higher consumer prices for milk from cows that have not been injected with the growth hormone.

Mike Lormore, dairy industry affairs director for Monsanto in St. Louis, said the issue is "accuracy in labeling." He said moves by retailers could limit long-term demand for the hormone, but has not had a "significant impact" on current sales.

Under FDA policy, food companies are allowed to make claims on labels that they do not use rBST, as long they do not "mislead consumers" to believe milk from cows without rBST is safer or of higher quality.