



EDITORIAL COMMENT

GOOD REASONS TO QUESTION ETHANOL'S FUTURE

READERS of this page know we are no fans of biofuel. The corn ethanol bandwagon clearly has cut into the margins of the dairy industry and the rest of animal agriculture. On top of that, there are growing suspicions that biofuel production is doing the environment more harm than good.

James Dunn's article on page 695 provides straightforward perspective on ethanol's impact. Simply put, there is only so much good farm land for corn or other crops, and many users of corn will pay the price regardless of how high it is.

To a great extent, this applies to those of us who feed cattle. There are alternatives, of course. But the "energy" commodities move with the corn market, for the most part.

The most recent USDA outlook predicts that about 4.2 billion bushels or 32 percent of this year's 13 billion-bushel corn crop will go for ethanol. That amount would go up if EPA raises the blend rate from the current 10 percent to 13 or 15 percent.

Besides us cattle feeders, there are others concerned about this possibility. For one thing, only a small number of the nation's 240 million cars and trucks can run well with an ethanol blend higher than 10 percent. The problem is even

worse for boats, snowmobiles, lawnmowers, and chain saws.

For another, consumers would pay more for their groceries. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that, between April 2007 and April 2008, greater use of ethanol resulted in a 10 to 15 percent rise in food prices. That meant Americans paid between \$5.5 and \$8.8 billion more for their groceries during that 12-month period.

But the real kicker is that there is a total lack of consensus within the scientific community about whether biofuels reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This is particularly true when it comes to the link between biofuel production and indirect land use change.

EPA's office of Transportation and Air Quality has found that the reductions in carbon dioxide from burning ethanol are minimal and may be negative. Last winter, a coalition of environmental groups called for a freeze on the renewable fuels standards saying there was overwhelming evidence that corn ethanol is causing more environmental damage than good.

Yes, there are good reasons to question the future of grain-based ethanol. Higher feed prices is just one of them.

TARGETED HERD REDUCTIONS HAVE THEIR PROBLEMS

THERE have been estimates that as many as 300,000 cows would have to be taken out of the picture before our industry would return to some semblance of supply/demand balance. It is not surprising that many have suggested that we remove so-called blemished or less productive cows from our herds. Specifically, some have suggested that we lower the legal limit for somatic cell count or that we remove cows infected with Johne's.

At first glance, these suggestions have more appeal than taking entire herds of seemingly healthy cows and removing dairy farm families from the picture, as well . . . at least for a year. However well-intentioned, these proposals have problems.

There have been several unsuccessful attempts to lower the 750,000 SCC legal limit. The number 400,000 often is mentioned . . . a limit some other countries have adopted, although enforcement is suspect. No action has been taken here, ostensibly because the issue has not been considered a public health matter. The strongest argument for a lower limit is that high-cell-count cows are more likely to receive treatment which may lead to more antibiotic use and resistance issues. However, the role, if any, of antibiotic use for mastitis treatment in antibiotic resistance is unknown. Besides, SCC levels in this country have been on the decline in recent years.

Lowering the SCC legal limit to 400,000 could have positive public relations and trade implications. However, we wonder how much it would reduce the milk supply. Culling high-cell-count cows (often lower producers) might just make more room for other healthier, higher-producing cows.

One problem with Johne's culls is that our tests just aren't that good. With ELISA tests, there are many false negatives. In one study with 158 tissue culture-confirmed positives, the best-performing ELISA test found only 27 positives. There are some newer PCR tests, but they cost \$25 to \$30 each. The fecal culture, the so-called gold standard, takes up to 16 weeks. And do we even have the lab capacity to handle potentially hundreds of thousands more Johne's samples?

Then, what do you do with the culled positives? There is no human health/food risk involved with proper slaughter of the cows. However, there is a potential public relations issue. Rendering those cows instead of slaughtering them would represent a cost to our industry.

One big advantage with whole-herd retirements is that CWT auditors can concentrate on several hundred herds. With a more piece-meal approach, thousands of herds would need to be monitored for verification, and it simply wouldn't be practical. Our herd reduction dollars would not stretch nearly as far.

OUR GUERNSEYS NOW HAVE SOME JERSEY HERDMATES

AT THE time of our expansion in 2007 and 2008, there was not much thought given to growing with any other breed than Guernseys. We purchased nearly 150 head from around the country to fill our new barn. Until this fall, we had been milking about 265 Guernseys with 330 on the test sheet.

We favor the high-solids breeds, and Guernseys are wonderful cows to work with. They are gentle (in a pinch, you can breed and do preg checks in the free stalls) and produce wonderful, high-solids milk. But each breed has its strengths and weaknesses. Guernseys can be a challenge to get bred. Plus they seem to be susceptible to metabolic and infectious diseases, although our SCC has been running around 160,000.

Now that we have resolved some problems with our manure storage (another story for another time) and the milk price picture is improving, we're in a position to add more cows. It is difficult to purchase good-sized groups of affordable Guernseys that meet our health and other requirements. That left us considering Holsteins or Jerseys.

So many people have told us that Jerseys don't co-mingle well with Guernseys that we have considered Holsteins. Besides, Holsteins would be a good fit for us from the standpoint of free stall sizes and parlor operation. However, our milk buyer, Torkelson Cheese, makes Muenster mostly and really likes high-solids milk.

This fall, we purchased 40 Jersey cows. They're the right size for our old tie stall barn which we

are operating as a free stall barn. They will be fed in existing outside bunks and milked in our parlor. First impressions are that they move from the parlor in about half the time of the Guernseys, and, yes, they are a little light-footed.

Guernseys continue to be an important part of our long-range plans for now. In fact, we just purchased another 10 Guernsey cows. We will watch energy-corrected milk production efficiency closely for all cows as well as preg rates, vet costs, and other factors in an effort to make a careful decision about the best cows for our business.



124 years ago . . .

To the common mind five dollars is five dollars and no more. To the financial mind it is the interest on one hundred. Very simple difference, isn't it? Yet see how widely apart it lands its possessors.

If we could get the dairy farmers of the land to look at five dollars from the interest standpoint, there would be more cash in the pocket, and many more wise investments made on the farm.

W.A. Hoard
Founder, 1885