If you think diafiltered milk IS milk, drink a glass of it

5 WORDS YOU'LL NEVER HEAR at the breakfast table: Please pass the diafiltered milk...

Why? Because diafiltered milk is not milk, and anyone who thinks it is milk should be made to drink a glass of it!

A concentrated milk protein "slurry", diafiltered milk is produced when water is re-introduced into thick (ultrafiltered) milk protein concentrate (MPC). The now-dilute concentrate can then be filtered a second time, boosting protein levels. This second filtering is known as diafiltration. Diafiltered "milk", containing over 85% protein on a dry matter basis, is the product of this process. And imports of diafiltered milk from the US are soaring.

American families are certainly not pouring diafiltered milk over their Wheaties in the morning. In fact, diafiltered milk doesn't really exist as an industrial product in the US except for export to Canada.

And this is something new...According to Dairy Farmers of Canada executive director Caroline Emond, in testimony this spring before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agrifood, dry milk protein imports have increasingly given way to liquid forms over the past five or six years. This timing is coincident with Canada's imposition of compositional standards for cheese that limit the use of modified milk ingredients (historically in dry form).

Quebec Conservative MP Jacques Gourde, former parliamentary secretary for agriculture under the previous government, went further in his testimony, claiming diafiltered milk "was developed solely to get across our border."

Because diafiltered milk contains 85 percent protein on a dry matter basis, Canada Border Services classifies diafiltered milk as a milk protein concentrate, allowing it tariff-free entry into Canada. In 2014, 14,000 MT of protein isolates were imported into Canada, up 37 percent over year earlier levels. Imports of diafiltered milk from the US have further increased over the past 12 months, driven by a glut of milk on world markets and opportunistic behaviour by Canadian manufacturers, who import it as a low cost MPC "ingredient" then use it as "milk" in the manufacture of cheese.

Not as a part of the allowable proportion of "milk ingredients" permitted under Canadian regulations governing cheese composition standards, but as "whole milk", displacing Canadian milk in the process, which must then be dumped at high cost to Canadian dairy farmers.

This situation arose as a result of recent advances in processing technology that allow for the separation of protein constituents (isolates) from fluid milk. Over the past decade, product from low-cost countries began flooding the Canadian market. With no tariffs, these cheaper derivatives began quickly replacing fluid milk in the manufacture of cheese by transnational giants Saputo, Parmalat and Kraft.

Canada's new cheese regulations, put in place by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in December 2008, should have put a stop to that. To preserve the flavour, smell, texture and feel consumers expect from Canadian cheese, the regulations require that while milk derivatives can be added to most varieties (up to 5% in soft cheeses, 17% in hard cheeses, 37% in mozzarella, none in aged Canadian Cheddar), whole milk must be the main ingredient. Challenged in court by Saputo and Kraft in 2009 (they lost), and heard again on appeal

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in 2010, the Federal Court of Canada has upheld Canada's cheese regulations on all counts.

With thirty seven percent of domestic raw milk destined for cheese production (vs. 39 percent sold as fluid and 24 percent as ice cream, butter and yoghurt), the impact on Canada's dairy farmers of "MPC masquerading as milk" is $231 million a year and climbing.

According to Gourde, US processors are "inventing products" that circumvent Canadian rules. "Americans don't eat cheese made with this stuff and no Canadian should either."

In his testimony before the Committee, Frederic Seppey, agricultural trade negotiator and assistant deputy minister, made this clear: "The standards were never designed to allow the unrestricted use of what is known as diafiltered milk in cheese. Its use is allowed, but in limited quantities..."

In its June 2016 report on the hearings into diafiltered milk, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agrifood agreed, urging the government "to recognize the magnitude of the economic losses to Canadian dairy producers from the importation of diafiltered milk, which has increased significantly over the last few years", and emphasizing that this must be "resolved rapidly". More meetings were proposed.

In the words of DFC's Carolyn Emond, "enough is enough". More meetings are not the answer. Dairy Farmers of Canada have had 60 meetings with government officials on this issue since 2011 and has sent 19 letters to various Ministers.

In fact, the solution is dead simple: the Canadian Food Inspection Agency needs to enforce their cheese regulations to ensure diafiltered milk entering Canada tariff-free as an "ingredient" does not morph into "milk" when used in the manufacture of cheese.

According to DFC, the easiest way to accomplish this is for CFIA to delegate the responsibility for the audit of the cheese compositional standards to the Canadian Dairy Commission. The CDC is aware of the issue, has the resources, and is ready and willing to help.

Why the hold-up?

For consumers and for industry, choice of course still exists. Any manufacturer is free to produce or import and sell a product with higher than allowed levels of milk derivatives. They simply cannot call it cheese. And that's a good thing.

For the rest of us cheese-lovers, Dairy Farmers of Canada's "little blue cow" logo must continue to deliver the promise that the cheese and yoghurt we purchase are made with 100% fresh milk from 100% Canadian cows.

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