



Cheese by any other name just isn't

The Federal Court of Canada upheld the government's right to set cheese standards

IN A TIME WHEN the dumbing down of our food has become a global trend, October's Federal Court of Canada ruling quashing Saputo, Parmalat and Kraft's challenge of Canada's new cheese regulations represents a victory for both farmers and consumers.

In its 51-page ruling, the Court was very clear: under both the Canadian Agricultural Products Act and the Food and Drugs Act, the federal government has the right to legislate the whole milk content of cheese manufactured or imported into Canada and sold in inter-provincial or export trade.

For dairy farmers, the benefits of knowing Canadian cheese will continue to be made with Canadian milk are obvious: 37 per cent of fluid milk produced by Canadian cows is destined for cheese manufacture.

Rural communities across Canada also benefit: the court decision means the value-added transformation of grass and sunshine and water into milk and cheese will continue, building important community capital.

Most importantly, consumers can count on the fact that when they say "cheese", that's exactly what they will get - high quality, tasty, safe and nutritious Canadian cheese made with Canadian milk.

The February 2008 Journal of Horticultural Science revealed that vegetables we consume today have lost between 10-40 per cent of their nutritional content through breeding, production, processing and transportation changes adopted to reduce costs and enhance competitiveness in a new, more aggressive global marketplace.

In the dairy sector, globalization triggered a rapid shift in the composition of two things Canadian consumers love the most: ice cream and cheese. Unless



Consumers can count on the fact that when they say 'cheese', that's exactly what they will get.

you are lucky enough to live close to one of the smaller creameries still making ice cream from fluid milk, you are probably one of many for whom imported sweetened butter oil, skim milk powder and water is the new "ice cream".

In the case of cheese, the big three cheese-makers began substituting cheaper, imported milk protein concentrates, milk protein products and whey protein products for whole, fluid milk in their manufacturing processes back in the 1990s. Last year alone, this cost dairy farmers \$250 million in surplus removal costs.

But the real hit is in the marketplace, where

[The writer is an award-winning Vancouver agrologist, and writer]

declining quality can only result in a drop in consumer demand for Canadian cheese. Indeed, in evidence before the Federal Court, a St Albert's Cheese Cooperative Master Cheesemaker with 40 years experience explained that the process of converting fresh liquid milk into a powdered milk derivative has an immediate impact on taste, and even small quantities of milk derivatives (greater than five per cent) can affect the taste, texture and consistency of cheese compared to cheese made with fresh milk.

And so, last December, the Canadian government put a stop to it. After two years of trying to bring farmers and processors to a common position, Ottawa recognized an impasse when they saw it and enacted regulations that reflected a compromise. The new whole-milk content regulations preserve the flavour, smell, texture and feel that consumers have come to expect when they buy a given variety of Canadian cheese, while still permitting varying amounts of powdered milk derivatives to be used in most varieties (up to five per cent in soft cheeses, 17 per cent in hard cheeses, 37 per cent in mozzarella and none in Canadian Cheddar).

For consumers and for industry, the 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.

After waiting almost nine months for this decision, dairy farmers could be forgiven for letting out a collective sigh of relief. But that could be premature. At time of writing, Canada's new Agreement on Internal Trade is scheduled for imminent ratification by the provincial premiers, and AIT support for supply management is anything but certain.

The critical component is AIT's chapter on agriculture (Chapter 9). Because final drafting has proceeded with no sectoral consultation, farm leaders worry flaws embedded in an earlier draft relating to the "technical measures" provisions remain.

If so, core functions of supply management (production, pricing, licensing), food origin labeling standards, prohibitions on the use of dairy terms and images for selling substitutes, cheese and yogurt composition and other provincial standards are all at serious risk.

If premiers want a model of an inter-provincial agreement that works, they need look no further than the recently-signed Trade and Cooperation Agreement between Quebec and Ontario. According to all reports, it sets a new standard

for collaborative, consultative agreements that benefit farmers, the agri-food industry and consumers.

Today in many countries around the world, dairy farmers face grave economic hardship as a result of market forces beyond their control and governments who look the other way. Canada's dairy farmers are a shining example of how a well-managed and orderly marketing system returns solid benefit to farmers, communities and consumers. Despite this, pressure remains high to dismantle our domestic supply management programs.

Remember this while you are enjoying your tasty, all-Canadian cheese this holiday season. Pay close attention to what your farm leaders have to say about Canada's new agreement on internal trade. And be prepared to stand up and support them. ☉



NEW

Altra-Air Fan with
WhalePower Technology

- * Fan incorporates WhalePower Tubercle Technology™
- * Leading edge of blade mimics the Humpback whale flippers
- * Maintains milk production during hot months
- * Fans size up to 24 ft with variable speed operation
- * 20% more efficient than any other fan

CANADA'S ONLY
MANUFACTURER
OF LARGE CEILING FANS






Envira-North

SYSTEMS LTD.

www.enviranorth.com

1-866-771-7766



bigair@enviranorth.com