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Tillamook dairies uphold hormone ban

The creamery association rejects a change in bylaws supported by Posilac maker Monsanto Co.

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THE OREGONIAN

TILLAMOOK — The Tillamook County Creamery Association's dairy farmers voted Monday to uphold a ban prohibiting them from vaccinating cows with an artificial growth hormone.

Monday's vote of 83-43 appears to conclude a struggle between the association's board and managers, who supported the ban, and some dairies and Monsanto Co., which opposed it. Monsanto manufactures the genetically engineered growth hormone, designed to cause cows to produce more milk, under the brand name Posilac.

The vote represents a victory for consumers concerned about new technologies used to boost food production, including the increased use of antibiotics and genetically modified or-

ganisms.

Jim McMullen, the creamery's president and chief executive officer, said Tillamook hopes that the cooperative can quickly move beyond divisions among its 147 members. Tillamook is Oregon's most productive dairy cooperative — and one of the state's best-known brands.

"Dairymen are really strong people," McMullen said outside a hall at the county fairgrounds, where the vote took place.

The Tillamook battle over Posilac be-

gan heating up last year. The cooperative's nine-member board voted in May to phase out the hormone's use by April 1, 2005.

The board based its decision on increasing inquiries by consumers over the hormone's use. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has concluded that milk derived from cows treated with the hormone is safe for human consumption, but some consumers worry about potential cancer risks and increased antibiotic use by dairies

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treating cows for udder infections.

Though studies differ, there is evidence to suggest that cows treated with Posilac run increased risks of udder infections and lameness.

Letter from Monsanto

In November, a Monsanto representative wrote a letter to the company's Tillamook customers suggesting that the board's decision was ill-advised and would reduce member dairies' profits.

The board reaffirmed its decision in January in response to a petition to reconsider by more than 80 member dairies. Just more than a week later, an attorney whose firm holds substantial ties to Monsanto delivered a letter to the creamery association office requesting Monday's vote by all members.

Although a Monsanto spokeswoman has said the attorney was not being paid by Monsanto to intervene, the creamery association labeled his involvement "audacious" in a news release.

The bylaw change voted on Monday would have amended the cooperative's bylaws to prevent its board from banning any pharmaceutical product approved by the FDA.

Other suppliers involved

McMullen said the next step by the creamery will be to ensure that its suppliers of butter, sour cream, yogurt and cream also are keeping

Posilac from being used by their dairies. The ban affirmed Monday applies only to dairies supplying milk directly to the association.

He had previously said Tillamook would not change its labeling to proclaim itself free of the hormone but Monday said that was still being explored.

"There's still the issue of what's next with Monsanto," he said, adding that he is not sure what, if anything, that company will do.

On Monday, Monsanto issued a statement about the vote.

"We are pleased that the producer owners of Tillamook had the opportunity to decide this for themselves and respect the choice of the majority of the producer owners," the statement said. "For individual producers, it is unfortunate that their choice to use a product that has provided a significant economic benefit for many Tillamook family farms has been limited.

"We hope that in time Tillamook producers will reconsider this policy."

Tillamook, founded in 1909, had \$262 million in sales in 2003.

Dairy members who supported the ban on Posilac said Monday that they were relieved that the vote to change the bylaws had failed.

"If we're going to market a top product, we're going to have to provide what the consumer is asking for," said Brad Cowan of Astoria.

But others who opposed the ban, including Bob Northrop of Tillamook, said they stand to lose thousands of dollars in income because their cows will produce less

milk. Northrop said he believes the hormone has no ill effects on humans or cattle.

Jim Wilson of Tillamook, who also opposed the ban, said he worries that dairy farmers will face further restrictions on the products they can employ.

"What's the next thing we won't be able to use?" he asked.