

Environment

Dairy industry forces rBST-free label ban

by Suzan Erem

One way or another, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Secretary Dennis Wolff is going to have to pay.

In October, under pressure from the dairy industry, Pennsylvania became the first state to ban the practice of labeling milk as free from Monsanto's artificial growth hormone rBST. To hedge its bets in case the label ban didn't go through, the industry has also been demanding compensation (an estimated quarter million dollars per day) for farmers who use rBST if market demands force them to drop use of the drug. The industry has been organizing for more than a year to reduce the growing demand for rBST-free milk.

Pennsylvania now faces the threat of lawsuits from activist groups, rBST-free dairy processors and retailers for everything from the cost of changing labels to lost business to violations of free speech and interstate commerce.

The decision by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture came less than two months after the Federal Trade Commission denied Monsanto's demand to investigate what the company called misleading labeling. rBST is also known as rBGH and by its brand name Posilac.

The regulations, revived from decades ago, ban producers from, among other things, making a "production-related claim that is supported solely by sworn statements, affidavits or testimonials." As a result, statements such as "Our farmers pledge this milk came from cows not injected with artificial growth hormone" would have been illegal as of Jan. 1, 2008. But as *Voices* went to press, the ban was postponed at least a month due to public pressure.

"Consumers have expressed a great deal of concern over food labeling practices," the department question-and-answer materials state. "Many feel that labeling and marketing practices are misleading from a health and safety standpoint, making it hard to make informed decisions."

"This is censorship," Rick North, project director of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility's Campaign for Safe Food, told *Voices*. "This isn't about protecting consumers. This is about protecting Monsanto's dwindling profits." The group is a vocal national critic of the artificial

growth hormone.

Andrew Martin agreed in a Nov. 11 *New York Times* commentary.

"[Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Secretary] Wolff's edict doesn't have anything to do with helping consumers. Otherwise, he would have tried to refine the labels or create a system for verifying dairy farmers' claims," wrote Martin in the *Times* Business section.

But a major local dairy farmer disagreed.

"The problem is all milk is free of antibiotics and a lot of things the labels are trying to differentiate," explained Abe Harpster, co-owner of Harpster Farms, a 2,000-head-plus dairy in Centre and Huntingdon counties. "In fact, all milk doesn't have what the labels are saying. It's taking some milk and making it look bad by portraying other milk as better when it really isn't."

The Federal Drug Administration approved Posilac in 1993 while Michael Taylor (former Monsanto attorney who returned to Monsanto in 1998) was deputy commissioner.

The state Department of Agriculture claims that in October 2007, it called together a "group of dietitians, consumer advocates and food industry representatives" that became its Food Label Advisory Committee. This committee agreed that "absence labeling specifically is misleading consumers."

Of the 15 organizations invited to serve on the committee, only one is a known rBST-free advocate, Pennsylvania Certified Organic. When asked for the list of individuals who attended the October meeting, Department of Agriculture spokesperson Chris Ryder said no attendance was taken.

Milk mathematics

Pennsylvania is the fourth largest dairy state, with an estimated 560,000 cows, according to May 2007 Penn State Agricultural Sciences statistics. An estimated 30 percent, or 168,000 cows, are injected with Posilac, regulators and dairymen said.

"They're going to lose a gallon of milk per cow [per day]," explained Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania President Logan Bower, who operates a dairy with more than 500 cows in Blair County. "And it's roughly a buck and a half at today's milk prices," he said.

That translates into a net loss of \$252,000 per day to Pennsylvania dairy farmers. (Well, at least to some—Posilac tends to be used by larger dairy operations.) This doesn't include the revenue lost by Monsanto, which enjoys representation in every major dairy promotion group in the state. At 38 cents per cow, a figure provided by Bower, Monsanto is taking in almost \$64,000 per day in Pennsylvania on Posilac alone.

So it was worth it for Monsanto Dairy's Kevin Holloway to make this demand at a September 2006 industry meeting:

"Buyers of specialty milk should pay [for] a farmer's choice to use safe, effective technology," Holloway said. "At a minimum, this premium should be guaranteed to pay for lost profitability, handling and verification costs of specialty milk. This guarantee should last as long as a producer is required to give up the choice."

In other words, processors, retailers and/or consumers should pay farmers for *not* injecting their cows with artificial growth hormones.

Could Monsanto and its year-long organizing drive exert enough pressure on Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture officials to sway them to make rBST-free claims virtually invisible to the public with this new regulation?

"Knowing there was some consumer demand for hormone-free milk, as consumers see that, knowing dairies were making that demand, and knowing that producers were going to lose production by not using rBST...yes, that created some momentum for this decision," admitted Cheryl Cook, deputy secretary for marketing and economic development for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Cook said farmers "all over the state" as well as dairy promotion groups approached the secretary with demands for compensation, yet she admitted the department has never calculated what that would cost.

Monsanto has been advocating this pricey alternative for more than a year, and dairy promotion groups have echoed the logic repeatedly.

"If you want affordable, safe domestic agriculture, then there are certain things that come along with that," explained Alan Novak, lobbyist and executive director of the Dairy Managers group. "That affordability comes into question here."



Photo by Mali Campbell

Labels such as this one have been banned from all dairy products sold in Pennsylvania as of Jan. 1, 2008.

"Wait a minute, their compensation is in part that they still have access to some of the markets they want," said Penn State agricultural economist Tim Kelsey. "It's not an issue of the government saying, 'You shall no longer produce milk with rBST.' It's a matter of some major customers saying, 'We no longer want to buy milk made with that hormone.'" Kelsey referred to the popularity of the protein-rich Atkins diet in the 1990s. Many consumers stopped eating bread, but no one compensated bakeries, he said.

But dairymen Bower and Harpster both said it isn't consumers who are driving the demand for rBST-free foods.

"It was more driven by marketers who had the idea they could charge an extra nickel or quarter and profit by selling this product," Bower said. "In those efforts they have confused and misled the consumer, and they have profited from it and the producers will end up paying the bill."

North, whose physicians' group has campaigned for more than four years on the issue, said consumers are very much behind the drive.

"The consumer demand is overwhelm-

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ing; this is what consumers want," he said. "I've gone to businesses, Rotary Clubs, universities, moms clubs, and I can tell you this: Once people find out about rBGH, many of them don't want anything to do with it."

As for farmers and processors who see losses in their future, North said to listen to the market.

"Switching to rBGH-free is not only the right thing to do for a processor, it's the smart thing to do, because that's where the money is," he said.

The magic of the market

Monsanto's labeling victory in Pennsylvania is the latest in a long string of battles that the company and its opponents have fought since rBST was approved 14 years ago.

A 1999 study by the University of Wisconsin showed that 74 percent of consumers were concerned about the process of injecting cows with artificial hormones. With recent food scares, awareness of food safety has grown. In a 2007 poll conducted by advocacy group Food and Water Watch of 1,000 adults living in the United States, 80 percent said producers who don't use rBST should be allowed to label their milk as such.

"This is about the point of purchase being [a] place to educate the consumer," said local resident Jon Clark, an attorney and Penn State graduate student. "It's one of the few places where we can get information about the agri-food system behind the food. We need to claim that area, and they're trying to shut that down. They're trying to depoliticize the supermarket."

Until now, the industry has been largely unsuccessful. More and more large dairy processors and retailers are demanding that milk producers go rBST-free.

Starbucks jumped on the bandwagon in 2007, as did Chipotle Mexican Grill, a chain of more than 530 restaurants. Dean Foods, the country's largest dairy processor, has converted to rBST-free production in a number of New England plants, and Safeway, one of the country's largest grocery chains, has gone rBST-free in the Northwest. Costco, Kroger, Trader Joe's and Whole Foods Market sell rBST-free products.

So it's beginning to look a lot like eroding market share for cows pumped up on Posilac. And that's a bottom line not lost on Monsanto, which announced just days after Pennsylvania's ban on rBST-free labels that

Monsanto, known for its previous safety claims about PCBs and Agent Orange, also claims Posilac (rBST) has no impact on human health.

its gross profits should double in the next five years, according to the *Times'* Martin.

Equal and opposite Ph.D.s

Posilac is promoted extensively and unapologetically by Penn State Dairy and Animal Science Department head Terry Etherton, who has gone so far as to calculate that rBST-free milk is selling at prices 36 percent higher than regular milk, according to a recent survey.

"They're buying a product for the same price but selling one at a higher price," Etherton said of processors who charge retailers a premium for rBST-free milk.

Harrisburg Dairies, according to its spokesperson and other dairy farmers, pays farmers top dollar for rBST-free milk. But Etherton's main complaint is that processors don't pass the premium price they get at one end to the farmers at the other.

"It's subtle extortion by processors," Etherton charged of processors demanding rBST-free milk from farmers. He said dairy farmers are dealing with a perishable commodity that can't be shopped around easily, causing higher hauling costs if they wish to continue to inject their cows with the artificial growth hormone.

But if rBST-free milk draws a higher price simply because of its perceived value among consumers, why wouldn't all farmers want to go rBST-free and enjoy that premium?

"I don't think the market share is that big," Etherton responded. "So I don't think the producer will get that from the processors."

Monsanto, known for its previous safety claims about polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and Agent Orange, also claims Posilac has no impact on human health.

So in the land that has proven the tenet "for every Ph.D. there is an equal and opposite Ph.D.," scientists like Etherton have been working hard to contest the evidence collected by other scientists, most of whom are not located at land grant universities that have much of their research funded by agricultural corporations like Monsanto. Etherton denies the charge made by many rBST-free milk advocates that he or his university are bought and paid for by the likes of Monsanto.

"That's nonsense," he said of the charge. "They pay my plane ticket. I don't get an honorarium or any profit from them." He admitted that in the early 1980s Monsanto

funded his research associated with rBST, but said that his department receives no funds from the company and that as department head he doesn't currently have a research program.

Most scientists agree that it is almost impossible to detect the artificial hormone in milk, but how it affects the cows is what concerns many consumers, as well as farmers who have decided not to use it. The Posilac label warns, among other things, that the drug may increase incidents of mastitis, a painful condition of the cow's udder, but some farmers have witnessed worse.

Farmer Charles Knight had to replace most of his herd due to ailments he attributed to the use of Posilac, according to research by Fox TV investigative reporters Steve Wilson and Jane Akre, a husband-and-wife team fired by the broadcast company after they blew the whistle on its Monsanto-friendly rewrite of their report.

"He is one of many farmers who say they've watched Posilac burn their cows out sooner, shortening their lives by maybe two




Photo by Wendy Holden

Use of the artificial growth hormone rBST increases milk production in cows by as much as a gallon per day. Farmers who use it say it keeps milk inexpensive. Opponents say increased mastitis in cow udders poses other problems.

years," the original report states. "Knight says he had to replace 75 percent of his herd due to hoof problems and serious udder infections. Those are two of more than 20 potential troubles listed right on the product warning label."

Knight's experience mirrors well-circulated Canadian research that showed

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CLOSED MONDAYS

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increased mastitis, lameness and failure to conceive among cows treated with rBST. The research, coming on the heels of the FDA's approval of the drug in 1993, has been used to ban the artificial hormone in Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility and Food and Water Watch have both collected extensive documentation of published research that indicates a correlation of rBST use and health problems in animals and research that indicates the potential of rBST to contribute to health problems in humans, but the industry continues to state there is no health risk associated with rBST.

Opponents say Posilac's label is enough to raise concerns. Farmers treat mastitis with antibiotics, and an increase in mastitis means an increase in antibiotic use. Agriculture Secretary Wolff, himself a dairy farmer, assures the public that milk is tested 10 times for such things as antibiotics before reaching the public, yet a *Wall Street Journal* investigation found 20 percent of milk tested independently had illegal antibiotics in it, according to a report by Chris Bedford of the Animal Welfare Institute.

"Other studies have found 38 percent higher levels. These antibiotics can contribute to antibiotic resistance in human consumers," Bedford reported. A further analysis of the original FDA approval study netted even more worrisome details.

"Normal pasteurization heats milk to 168 degrees for 15 seconds to destroy bacteria and other contaminants. The FDA approval study, conducted by a Canadian undergraduate named Paul Groenewegen from Guelph, Canada, cooked the milk for 30 minutes, one hundred and twenty times longer than commercial production practice. According to Groenewegen, only 19

"All of us who have kids are pretty clear with them why performance-enhancing drugs are not used in sports, so how do we tell our kids that the milk they drink in the mornings can be produced with performance-enhancing drugs?"

--Brian Snyder

percent of the rBGH and IGF-1 were destroyed in the FDA study's extended pasteurization process, not the 90 percent claimed by the agency," Bedford reported. IGF-1 is an insulin-like hormone that affects growth and development.

"It's not the science, stupid"

Locally, activists and others haven't been sucked into the science of the issue. Centre Hall resident and farm activist Brian Snyder said it's also an ethical issue.

"All of us who have kids are pretty clear with them why performance-enhancing drugs are not used in sports, so how do we tell our kids that the milk they drink in the mornings can be produced with performance-enhancing drugs?" Snyder is executive director of Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, which is building a coalition of groups organizing to reverse the labeling rule.

Clark agreed.

"Terry Etherton and other scientific supporters of rBST attempt to frame the controversy as if health risks were the only issues that mattered to the public. This is the 'riskification' of controversies that are about much more than just risk," he said. "Some people might not want to drink milk from cows injected with rBST for reasons that have nothing to do with risk. Maybe I don't like Monsanto, or maybe I don't like it when cows are treated as if they were milk factories."

Even processors see reasons other than health risks for going rBST-free.

"Some people feel they need this man-

agement tool in order to run their business, and I would not begrudge them that," said Betsy Albright of Harrisburg Dairies, which only contracts with farmers who pledge not to use rBST. The dairy recently changed its labels to reflect the practice. "What we are doing is responding to our market."

So while Monsanto and big industry have been able to raise the issue of lost revenue with Harrisburg officials, and raise the expectation among farmers that they should be compensated for market forces working against them, current rBST-free dairies and producers now face lost revenue themselves if they can't differentiate the source of their products from rBST-injected cows. And they can add to that the cost of changing labels and other transport and production processes they put in place in good faith under FDA guidelines.

Deputy Secretary Cook said addressing that concern is a likely outcome of this debate.

"We're going to have to give them some opportunity to prove it, and that only can happen through an independent check, something short of a full-blown organics check," she explained. "Let's have the conversation in six months or a year."

Then there's the interstate commerce issue.

"Pennsylvania is closing all of its borders to any product that is rBST-free," explained Albright. "Absolutely nothing can be sold in this state that is labeled rBST-free. A lot of people ship product into this state, and they're going to choose not to do so." Harrisburg Dairies, Albright said, imports its cottage cheese from Wisconsin. "They are probably not going to ship us product here because they can't logistically label their stuff for Pennsylvania differently than [for] any other state."

"A supermarket could challenge this," said Clark, reviewing the new regulations. "I would argue that this is an unconstitutional interference with interstate commerce."

What comes next?

PASA's Snyder said the story won't be over soon. One of the group's first jobs is to rebut the Department of Agriculture's claims about the source of the problem.

"We have to expose the fact that this

move has not been instituted on behalf of consumers like the department is saying," he said. "Consumers are not demanding to get less information. That's just common sense."

And like many advocates for rBST-free products, Snyder was quick to state that the farmers are not to blame here, and they deserve to make a living wage for the work they do.

"I would not blame any farmer for using it, because it's being marketed to them as something that'll give them a competitive edge," he said of rBST. "But as soon as they buy it, Monsanto's going to go to their neighbor and sell it too, so now who's got the competitive edge? Only one company. It's a substance we do not need."

Pennsylvania officials are not concerned.

"We have the regulatory power to do this," said the Agriculture Department's Cook. "We're on fairly solid ground as far as legal authority. If by raising all this we can prompt the FDA to act, then good for everybody—we'll get some uniformity in the industry."

Finally, because no test exists that effectively detects rBST in milk, if the label decision is reversed, consumers will still only have the sworn word of a farmer who promises he doesn't use it, a nearly unenforceable claim, regulators say.

Want to weigh in? Contact

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For more information

Pennsylvania Association
for Sustainable Agriculture
pasafarming.org

Terry Etherton's blog
<http://blogs.das.psu.edu/tetherton>

Food and Water Watch
<http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org>

Original Fox News report
www.foxbghsuit.com

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Rush Twp. election keeps landfill issue alive

by Michele Russell

The November elections brought nothing less than a referendum on a landfill proposed for northwest Centre County. It's a referendum the landfill appears to have lost.

In a stunning 543 to 454 vote, landfill opponent Mike Savage ousted incumbent and Rush Township chairman Chairman Jack Shannon after a three-year community-wide effort to stop Resource Recovery, LLC from planting its first-ever landfill in the region.

But as if to thumb their noses at the vote, sitting supervisors put the landfill on the agenda for the township meeting just two days after the election. Rush Township citizens turned out in force. The crowd demanded to know what supervisors were trying to do.

"Many of the citizens don't show up unless they know something that they are interested in will come up on the agenda for the meeting," said Jenn Shufran, a Rush Township resident.

Shannon responded to questions from the crowd by announcing the vote for continuing the landfill project would be postponed until roughly a month from that day. A number of people asked why Shannon would not hold off on the vote until the new supervisor took over in January. When Shannon dismissed the issue almost half of the crowd walked out of the meeting.

Shannon stated in an April 2006 interview with *Voices* that he had "no doubt" of his constituency's support for the landfill. When asked if he still believed that after losing the election, his only response was, "No comment."

"At this point, the board is really hitting below the belt," said Shufran, a landfill opponent. "I keep asking them about the landfill at every township meeting for the last two years, and I never get a straightforward response," said Shufran said.

"I think the fact that Mike Savage won the election in Rush certainly quells Shannon's argument that most of the township's citizens support the landfill," said Michele Barbin, a researcher for People Protecting Communities, a grass roots coalition developed to raise awareness about the proposed landfill.

With a new make up of township supervisors, a new county commission and possibly new representatives on the crucial Metropolitan Planning Organization, it looks like the tide may turn more convincingly against the landfill project. With two

of three township supervisors on record opposing the landfill, local activists say one possibility is that the township will withdraw its request for a new interchange off of Interstate 80.

"That would be one of the things for the township to consider," said Jon Eich, incoming Centre County Commission Board of Commissioners chairman. "I think the landfill becomes impractical without the interchange."

Eich said another possibility is to let the MPO, which may or may not have new faces on it, vote on the interchange, but that's a risk.

"You don't really know how those new and old faces will vote," he said.

People Protecting Communities began in Snow Shoe Township as a citizens' committee when Resource Recovery first proposed the landfill be built there in 2004. When the township rejected the company's proposal, Resource Recovery moved on to neighboring Rush Township. The committee then used its organization to investigate Resource Recovery's proposal.

PPC discovered that Resource Recovery claimed \$1 million in real estate tax benefit for the Philipsburg-Osceola School District on the company's land permit application. PPC researchers calculated only \$360,000 in benefits.

Resource Recovery also projected that the landfill would create an estimated 3,085 jobs, more than half of which would be temporary construction jobs. The company also claimed in its 2006 Department of Environmental Protection landfill permit application that it would infuse \$2.5 million into the local economy in the form of 69 employees' salaries, 3.5 percent more than that of the average landfill, which functions with only 20 employees according to research conducted by PPC.

"It is easy to say that [the landfill] will create jobs," said supervisor-elect Savage. "But when you get down to it and you do the math, you see that there is no definite way to tell what jobs will be created or how much the [township's] tax base will be increased."

Resource Recovery plans to spend \$3.44 million for 5,700 acres for the landfill and industrial park, according to its DEP land permit application, a hefty price for land that the company claimed was just a "brownfield," said Barbin.

Leading up to the contentious election, Resource Recovery turned up the heat to gain support for the landfill. First, company

representatives made a \$1.2 million offer in tax revenue to the local school board in exchange for a resolution and "letters of unwavering support" for the landfill, according to the local newspaper, *The Progress*. The board did not act on the offer. Then just days before the election, a promotional DVD produced by the company landed in the mailbox of every voter. Community members responded with angry letters to the editor in local area daily papers.

Since the election, it's been difficult to find company representatives. Former state representative Lynn Herman worked for Resource Recovery until recently, but is no longer with the company. A woman answering the phone at the company's Lancaster office said she didn't know anything about a landfill or where Centre County is located, and Resource Recovery representatives were not present at the township meeting where their three-year project was expected to be voted upon. The company provides only an e-mail address on its DVD and its Web site and did not respond to an inquiry except to refer a reporter to the DVD.

"Resource Recovery always said, 'If you have any questions about the landfill project, just ask us,'" said Barbin. "And then they don't answer anyone's phone calls."

Barbin added that while the landfill issue remains unresolved, the controversy has brought needed attention to the problems in the area.

"I think that the landfill issue has raised an awareness of this part of the Centre Region," she said. "We were not high on the priority list of Centre County, but when Resource Recovery's proposal came up, it made everyone aware of what was going on up here."

For more information

People Protecting Communities
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For Resource Recovery's streaming video of the promotional DVD entitled "A New Beginning" go to
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After oil peaks, adopt precautionary principle

by Chris Uhl

Recently my partner, Dana, and I invited several dear friends over to our place for dinner. There were six of us around the table. As is often the case at dinner parties the conversation was sprinkled with light banter, stories and anecdotes. But then, and I don't remember the hinge point, the conversation shifted to the sobering topic of whether each of us believed all the reports these days about "Peak Oil" and the economic collapse that will ensue as oil becomes more scarce.

Specifically, we consider the question: How would we act if we accepted that in the near future we will be descending into an economic collapse with life-altering impacts for each of us and those we love?

Before going further, allow me to explain why we would even ask this seemingly alarmist question in the first place. The question is grounded in the uncontested fact that the health of our economy depends on the abundance of cheap oil and that there are finite limits to the availability of this oil. Most experts predict that oil production for

Our
World

the world as a whole will peak in the very near future – before 2020.

Now here is the sobering part: Once that peak is reached, oil availability will decline by an estimated 3 percent per year (a conservative estimate). This means that if we reach peak in, say, 2010, then later in 2035 there will be only half the oil now available to fuel the global economy. Imagine a world swollen to 8 billion-plus people, everyone wanting the good life, but with only half the petroleum resources we now have available each day.

This scenario is more than a little worrisome for those of us in the U.S. in so far as we consume approximately one-quarter of the world's oil, but we possess only about 4 percent of Earth's petroleum resources. Think about it.

The majority of the stuff we consume

from computers to toasters to blue jeans relies on oil for its production. Moreover, our transportation, food, and health care systems are highly oil dependent, not to mention our whole system of national defense (and offense).

Of course, there will still be oil available after the peak, just less of it to go around. And with increased scarcity, demand will rise and so will prices. Indeed, if the past is any indication, we can expect that with a decline in oil availability by as little as 5 percent, prices will increase 3 to 4 fold. This is what happened during the 1970 oil shocks and again in California a few years back when there were sudden shortfalls in the production of natural gas. Now imagine, if you dare, the astronomical rise in prices as oil availability declines not by just 5 percent, but plummets relentlessly downward year after year.

As I take all of this in, there is a part of me that reacts with "Yes... but...." For example, "Yes but coal will save us.... Yes, but biofuels will save us.... Yes, but tar sands will save us...." However, each of these alternatives has severe limitations and compares very poorly to oil in terms of energetic returns and versatility.

If you are immobilized by uncertainty as you consider how to respond to the specter of peak oil, I recommend that you visit www.lifeaftertheoilcrash.net and read the center piece that begins "Dear Reader..." Then, I invite you to ask the same question my friends and I asked each other over dinner: How would you act if you accepted that in the near future we, as a nation, will be descending into an economic collapse with life-altering impacts for you and those you love?

Asking this question is tantamount to abiding by The Precautionary Principle. This principle, in effect, states: if the future for our species is uncertain, it is best to choose a path with the lowest risk, even if this path is not the most profitable or the most comfortable. The Precautionary Principle advises that, given present uncertainties and considering the very real possibility of widespread economic collapse, the most prudent thing to do is to take measures now to drastically reduce our dependence on petroleum.

As the six of us sat around the dinner table that night we allowed ourselves to consider, in concrete terms, what it would mean to adopt The Precautionary Principle—i.e., what it would mean to significantly reduce our dependence on oil. Noting that it was a chilly night, we first



considered how we would heat our homes without oil and/or natural gas (Note: the natural gas peak will follow close on the tail of the oil peak). Then we wondered what we would do for food in so far as much of what we eat comes from far away and requires lots of oil to grow, process, package and transport. We wondered, too, how we would get around with gas selling for \$10 a gallon.

Initially, our responses had an every-man-for-himself survivalist quality. We would stockpile food and water, buy a gun, and hunker down. In this vein we begin to consider our personal survival skills. Did anyone know where to get fresh water nearby?

Could anyone make a fire without a match? Did anyone know how to identify edible wild plants? We were humbled as we realized the limitations of our individual survival skills.

Clearly, going it alone was not an option. The way to "power down" we realized was to tap into the power inherent in community. The question wasn't so much, what can I do for myself? Rather, the question should be, what can we do for each other?

I take inspiration these days from a group of citizens in Brattleboro, Vt., who have formed an organization called Post Oil Solutions.

POS relies on local Yankee ingenuity to create lifestyles grounded in energy self-sufficiency rather than oil dependency. They are doing this first by focusing on food security and thus taking steps to ensure that they can feed each other with food grown locally.

So it is that POS recently instituted the "Localvore Challenge," a call to eat for a week consuming only locally produced food. One hundred and fifty people took

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Evening grosbeak is a rare visitor to the area

by Alice Fuller

BIRD
Watch

Back in mid-October on a bright sunny day, some special birds visited our yard. I was sitting at the dining table in our family room/kitchen when I chanced to look at the bird feeder hanging just outside the patio window doors. To my surprise, the bird perched on it gobbling up sunflower seed hearts was a female evening grosbeak. Soon she was joined by four more females and one male evening grosbeak.

It seems curious that a grosbeak with the name “evening” is rarely seen at that time of the day. It was about noon when the birds arrived at my feeder, and they dined until about 2 p.m. and then flew off. One female came back for a snack about an hour later, but I did not expect to see them again that day in spite of their name. Although “evening grosbeak” is a romantic name, it is something of a misnomer; this particular grosbeak apparently retires early. Birders have found evening grosbeaks arriving in roosts for the night almost an hour before sunset.

Perhaps “morning grosbeak” would be a better name for a bird that turns up at dawn, clamoring for breakfast and then rushing from feeder to feeder during the morning hours; however, the bird’s history may provide a clue to the selection of the name “evening.” Harry R. Schoolcraft made the first record of an evening grosbeak in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., in April 1823. A boy shot the bird with an arrow and took the bird to Mr. Schoolcraft.

In August of that same year, a U.S.

boundaries agent, Major Delafield, discovered the bird northwest of Lake Superior. In his notes he wrote that he’d heard some birds cry out at twilight and recognized them from the description written by Mr. Schoolcraft. He concluded that the bird dwelt in dark retreats and left them at the approach of night. Bird authorities believe that the major and his party disturbed the roosting birds while making camp, causing them to call out in what the major described as “a mournful cry.”

Whether or not this history was the reason, this species was given the rather poetic scientific name of *Hesperiphona vespertina*. The generic name “*Hesperiphona*” was taken from the Greek name for the Hesperides, the mythical “daughters of the night” who dwelled on the western verge of the world where the sun goes down. The specific name “*vespertina*” refers to the vespers of evening times.

The Chippewa Indians gave the bird a very appropriate name. They called it “Pashundamo,” a name that refers to the stoutness of the bill and its ability to crack hard seeds. I admit I am a little relieved that the grosbeak wasn’t given the Native American name because I should have to look up the spelling each time I wished to write about the bird. My favorite name for this bird is the one given to it by early French explorers; “le-gros-bee errant,” or

“the wandering grosbeak.”

According to the Book of North American Birds, before the beginning of this century, evening grosbeaks lived and nested only in the conifers of northern Canada and the high mountains of the West. Then, early in the 1900s, isolated birds began to wander irregularly south and east for the winter. By 1916, small flocks began appearing erratically throughout the Northeast, and some of the wanderers eventually stayed behind to nest in eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. By the 1960s, flocks of evening grosbeaks were patronizing winter feeders as far south as Maryland, and by the 1970s these vagabonds were wintering in Florida and the Gulf states.

No one knows exactly what precipitated the early wanderlust in these once stay-at-home birds – perhaps population pressure, a food shortage, or some other crisis. Whatever the cause, it affected only small segments of the population in any given winter. But the consequences of this tenuous beginning could be far-reaching. Winter is certainly less arduous in warmer climes, and the increasing prevalence of bird feeders stocked with protein-rich sunflower seeds makes survival even easier. It seems possible that evening grosbeaks, aided by carefully tended feeding stations, may evolve into regularly migratory birds. They might even take up nesting in the conifers of the Appalachian Mountains.

Dorothy Bordner has sketched an evening grosbeak feeding on one of its favorite wild foods: the winged seeds of the



box elder tree.

Several records of evening grosbeaks have been scattered so far this fall over Pennsylvania. One State College Bird Club member doesn’t believe that this is going to be a big evening grosbeak winter because as yet there are too few records, occurring too late in the season. Still, it is hard to predict what these fascinating birds are likely to do. My husband Ted worries that if these birds occur in large numbers (as they have in years past), it will put quite a strain on the budget to feed birds that can gobble up pounds of their favorite food: sunflower seeds. So far, his worries seem to be needless. Even so, I should be pleased to see at least a few of these golden birds with black wings on a regular basis. It is always nice on a zero degree morning to admire the evening grosbeak’s bright splash of color as well as his noisy, vigorous activity and warmth of life, all of which enliven the winter landscape.

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part and in so doing challenged the predominant pattern in America where each item of food we produce requires 10 times as much energy—in the form of fossil fuel—as the food, itself, actually contains. Our food travels, on average, 1,500 miles before reaching the supermarket shelves and is often highly processed and excessively packaged. By contrast, eating local, fresh (read unprocessed and unpackaged) food results in a significant decline in petroleum dependence.

The Vermont localvores, recognizing that peak oil may very well signal the end of our current far-flung, oil-dependent global food system, decided to test their prospects for survival in the event that they only had access to locally produced food. They discovered that they found that there was an

abundance of healthful and delicious food available in September and now they are set to repeat the test in January, a more challenging month to be sure. In the process of these experiments, participants are discovering that they are making new friends, sharing food knowledge and hatching new food-related projects (e.g., developing community gardens, creating a winter farmers market).

The upshot of all this for me is most surprising. By sidestepping doubt, denial and despair and simply choosing to believe that the age of cheap oil is rapidly coming to an end (i.e., by applying The Precautionary Principle), I feel more energized and purposeful.

In closing, consider that one of the remarkable qualities of Americans is our ability to muster creativity and ingenuity as we rise to face daunting challenges. Now at

the outset of the 21st century we have before us a challenge worthy of our greatness—namely to avert economic collapse by resurrecting our local economies and

moving toward energy independence. It is time to get moving. What better way to start than to ask in our communities and neighborhoods: What can we do for each other?

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