

Howard Marklein: Almond “milk” is not milk, veggie “burgers” are not burgers and fake “Swiss” is not cheese!

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As the State Senator for one of the most ag-dependent districts in Wisconsin, I am consistently looking for ways to support our farmers and the agriculture economy. The Wisconsin Cheesemakers, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative and the Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin recently conducted a study to determine whether consumers know the difference between real cheese and plant-based, imitation “cheese”. They found that 48% of people surveyed thought that the fake, plant-based “cheese” was actually real cheese!

In response, Rep. Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City), Rep. Loren Oldenburg (R-Viroqua) and I have introduced three bills to tell the Truth in Food Labeling. We want consumers to know what they are buying and eating. We want consumers to know the differences between the real, nutritious products grown and made by our farmers versus the fake, lab-grown, plant-based products that are passing for milk, meat, cheese, ice cream and other dairy products in our state. We want consumers to fully recognize the nutritional differences between real dairy and meat versus imitation food by the same name.

I know that these bills aren't a silver-bullet that will solve the problems for our ag-economy, but they are something we can do to protect and promote real ag-products to consumers, as well as to encourage consumers to make good decisions about the food they are putting into their bodies. I, for one, prefer a cold glass of cow's milk to a cup of almond beverage any day.

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These bills will also put some pressure on the Federal government to take action on existing food labeling laws. Our bills are structured so that the requirements become actionable when a specific number of other states take similar action. We did this so that Wisconsin is not an outlier, but part of a coalition of states requiring companies to correctly label their products. There is strength in numbers and we are in good company.

For Truth in Milk Labeling, the only products that can be labeled as “milk” come from a cow or other hooved or camelid mammal, such as a goat. Plant-based products will be required to be labeled as “drink” or “beverage”. This bill is modeled after similar legislation in North Carolina and Maryland, both of which have passed milk labeling laws in the last two years.

To alleviate interstate commerce concerns and align with the North Carolina and Maryland laws, our law would only go into effect after at least 10 out of a group of 15 states pass similar legislation by June 30, 2031. This bill is supported by the Dairy Business Association, the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, and the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association.

For Truth in Meat Labeling, labeling plant-based meat alternatives and cell-cultured meat alternatives as “meat” or a similar term, such as “burger”, “sausage”, “chicken wing”, or “bacon”, would be illegal. This would apply to packaging on products sold in stores, menus in restaurants, and promotional materials.

Meat is defined as the edible part of the flesh of a mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian, mollusk, or insect that does not include cultured animal tissue that is produced from animal cell cultures. Fish is not included because it is not defined as a meat product in statute and it has not been included in legislation passed by other states.

At least 11 other states, including North Dakota and South Dakota, have passed this legislation. In general, these measures have been passed with broad bipartisan support. Similar legislation has also been introduced in at least a dozen other states including Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois. This legislation is supported by the Wisconsin Cattlemen’s Association, the Wisconsin Pork Association, the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, and the Dairy Business Association.

Finally, 90% of Wisconsin's milk goes into cheese. It is concerning that many consumers don't know the difference between which products contain milk and which do not. This confusion, oftentimes without the consumer knowing otherwise, hurts Wisconsin's dairy industry.

As dairy farmers continue to struggle with low milk prices, imitation products cut into a farmers' bottom-line. Similarly, on the market are "dairy-free" yogurts, ice creams, and butter.

The Dairy Product Truth in Food Labeling bill will ensure that if a package says "cheese" or "yogurt", the product actually has dairy in it. In this case, Wisconsin will be first state to pass Truth In Labeling for Dairy Products! This legislation is supported by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and the Dairy Business Association.

I am optimistic that these positive, bi-partisan bills will move swiftly through the legislative process. I am also certain that these bills will create a conversation, make consumers more aware and support our farmers statewide.

- Marklein, R-Spring Green, represents the 17th Senate District.