

Dairy Business Association: Urges Senate to support truthful labeling

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MADISON— Standing up for customers and farmers, the Dairy Business Association today pressed the state Senate to approve legislation aimed at stopping the use of misleading labels on imitation dairy and meat products.

The Senate was holding a hearing on bills that seek to ban the labeling of food as milk or as a dairy product or ingredient if the food is not made from the milk of a cow or another hooved mammal. Another part to the proposal would essentially do the same for meat products.

“Parents who are deciding what to feed their families deserve transparency,” DBA President Amy Penterman, a mom who farms in northwestern Wisconsin, said. “The variety of beverages and other foods being misrepresented as real dairy seems to grow by the day. Customers should have options, but misleading those customers about what’s in their food is wrong.”

A number of other states would have to follow suit for the dairy measures to become law in Wisconsin, under federal interstate commerce rules. Some states have already done so.

Chad Zuleger, associate director of government affairs for DBA, told the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism that the bills also would protect dairy farmers and processors from being treated unfairly.

“The federal government’s failure to enforce existing standards of identity for milk

and other dairy products has made it necessary for states like Wisconsin to act,” Zuleger said.

This failure also raises concerns about how well the government will be able to handle emerging labeling concerns about plant-based products that imitate meat as well as lab-grown cultured tissue, he said.

“Hopefully, by states taking action regarding meat labeling now, we can prevent the abject failure to protect farmers, processors and customers that has already occurred in the dairy space,” Zuleger said.

Penterman praised Sen. Howard Marklein, R-Spring Green, and Reps. Travis Tranel, R-Cuba City, and Clint Moses, R-Menomonie, for their leadership on the legislation, and the co-sponsors for their support. The state Assembly approved the bills last year but the Senate was unable to complete its final session day in March due to the onset of COVID-19.

“We urge the full Senate to stand up for customers and the dairy community and make this happen,” Penterman said. “A vote for these bills is a vote for Wisconsin families and farmers.”

Customer confusion

Research has shown that imitation dairy products do confuse customers. For example, a national survey commissioned by Wisconsin dairy groups found that customers are confused about whether imitation cheese products are indeed dairy foods and whether they carry the same nutritional value. Some of the findings, which were released in 2019:

- One-quarter of customers mistakenly think plant-based products labeled as cheese contain milk.
- One-third of customers believe that the products contain protein, and 21 percent think that it is of a higher quality than dairy even though the imitations have little to no protein. Real dairy cheese has 7 grams of protein.
- One-quarter of customers purchase imitation cheeses because they believe them to be low in calories and fat and without additives. In reality, these plant-based foods contain an equal or comparable amount of fat and calories and substantially more additives than dairy cheeses.

Customer survey:

[Study background and executive summary](#)

[A graphic of key findings](#)

Senate documents:

- Milk — [co-sponsorship memo](#) and [bill](#)
- Dairy product or ingredient — [co-sponsorship memo](#) and [bill](#)
- Meat — [co-sponsorship memo](#) and [bill](#)
- [DBA testimony from Chad Zuleger](#)