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Area Grocers Balk at 'Genetic' Milk

Markets Won't Carry Product, Citing Controversy Over Hormone

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Milk produced by cows given a genetically engineered drug will be available this month, but Washington area consumers won't be drinking it.

Major grocery store chains in the region—including Giant, Safeway, Shoppers Food Warehouse and nearly all 7-Elevens—said yesterday they will not be selling milk from animals given bovine growth hormone because of controversy over the drug.

Sold under the brand name Posilac by Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, the drug increases milk production in cows by as much as 20 percent. It was approved last fall by the Food and Drug Administration and will be available to dairy farmers Friday.

Many other companies and dairy producers nationwide will not buy milk produced by cows on the drug, according to dairy and other food industry association executives. Most of the companies believe the milk is safe but want to avoid being targeted by consumer groups that claim the milk is potentially harmful, they said.

Monsanto spokesman Tom McDermott said the company knows of no widespread boycott by food manufacturers and retailers. But the reluctance of some big-name stores here and elsewhere in the country signals that food associated with genetically produced drugs could face significant resistance.

Companies that said they will not sell products containing milk from treated cows include Borden Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, a maker of condensed milk and other dairy products; Lifeline Food Co. of

Seaside, Calif., which sells fat-free cheeses; and Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. of Waterbury, Vt., an ice cream company.

It is impossible to devise a test to detect milk from cows treated with Posilac, because the milk carries no trace of the drug. But cows forced to produce more milk tend to get more udder infections. That means they are on more antibiotics, and "antibiotics do appear in milk," said consumer activist Jeremy Rifkin, a long-time opponent of genetic engineering, who charges that the milk is unsafe.

Monsanto said that's nonsense. Federal rules restrict the level of antibiotics in milk and, for that reason, milk produced with Posilac will be indistinguishable in every way from milk from untreated cows, spokesman McDermott said.

Rifkin yesterday released a list of 125 companies and dairy cooperatives that, according to him, have said they will not sell milk produced by treated cows, at least for now.

The sale of Posilac Friday will make milk the second food the government has allowed to be made using a genetically engineered substance, although it is the first to generate protest from consumer groups.

In 1990, the FDA approved for sale a genetically engineered enzyme from Pfizer Inc. used to make cheese, and today 60 percent of all cheese sold in the United States is made with the enzyme, according to the Biotechnology Industry Organization, the trade group for the genetic engineering industry.

Rifkin said that no one has protested the cheese enzyme because it doesn't cause any harmful side effects, as he believes the bovine hormone does. He and his group, called the Pure Food Campaign, said they will stage several protests in front of stores around the country today where they plan to dump milk onto the ground.

The growth hormone—also known as bovine somatotropin, or BST—has sparked what seems likely to be the first of many debates over biotechnology and food. A long list of genetically engineered products is about to come to market, industry executives said. Some Wall Street analysts predict the FDA will approve more genetically engineered products in 1994 than in the previous 10 years combined.

Genetic engineering, or biotechnology, refers to the manipulation of genes, which are the collection of chemicals in a cell that tells it what to