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OF INTEREST

Nation's milk producers cry foul over non-dairy imitators

Got milk?

Not unless it came from a cow, goat or sheep, claims the National Milk Producers Federation.

Tired of competing with "phony" milk beverages made from soy, almond and rice, the group yesterday petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to restrict the use of the word to only animal-based products.

"The FDA has allowed the meaning of 'milk' to be watered down to the point where many products that use the term have never seen the inside of a barn," said Jerry Kozak, president and chief executive of the federation, in a statement yesterday. "Although some phony dairy foods may have a passing resemblance to their authentic counterparts, they are very different in nutritional value."

The group said it first alerted the federal agency about "misleading labeling" in 2000, with no success. The number of artificial dairy products has since increased, with some brands using invented words like "cheeze" to skirt standards, it added.

But the federation's latest plea didn't sit well with at least one New Jersey milk producer, who called the petition a "naïve" effort to hurt demand for non-dairy milk products.

"Look, it's a little silly. There is no confusion among consumers," said Cyrus Schwartz, president of Dora's Naturals, which manages both dairy brand Mountainside Farms and soy brand ZenSoy.

Schwartz, a fifth-generation milk producer in South Hackensack, said he doubts a labeling change will benefit the dairy industry. Most soy milk consumers intentionally

avoid dairy because they are vegan or lactose-intolerant, he said, not because they have been duped into thinking it is another dairy option.

"It will be somewhat confusing for consumers that after years of seeing 'soy milk,' now it will be called 'soy beverage,'" he said.

And while demand for his soy products has trumped demand for dairy in the past decade, Schwartz blamed the proliferation of other beverage options like soda, juice and sports drinks. Milk — both dairy and soy — has been relegated to being a "topper" for cereal or coffee, he said.

Incidentally, Webster's New World dictionary seems to approve both definitions of milk, as "an emulsion secreted by the mammary glands" as well as "any liquid like this, as the juice of various plants or fruits."

Leslie Kwok



PHOTO COURTESY DORA'S NATURALS

Cyrus Schwartz, president of Dora's Naturals, says buyers know the difference between real and nondairy 'milk.'