

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

The European livestock scare

A ban on hormone additives is a bad precedent for the United States.

European environmentalists and consumerists are celebrating what the *Washington Post* described as their "first multinational victory" this month with the decision by agriculture ministers of the European Community to place an across-the-board ban on the use of synthetic hormones in livestock raising.

The EC decision, which has still to be worked out in detail, appears to go far beyond its precedent, the outlawing of the hormone DES in livestock raising in the United States a year ago. Reports also indicate that the European environmentalists focused heavily on issues of "animal welfare" now being played up in the U.S. by Burgess Meredith in his "Those Amazing Animals" television series.

The flap in Europe began last summer when the media drummed up a story concerning possible cancer-causing hormones in French veal exported to Italy as baby food. Propaganda emphasized that at least 80 percent of French veal was produced from cattle receiving hormone injections. Italy promptly banned the import of French veal, in technical violation of the EC Treaty of Rome. French consumer groups simultaneously went into action, calling for a boycott in early September which caused a 50 percent drop in veal slaughter and sales within two weeks which rapidly spread to Belgium and Britain. On Sept. 23 an Italian magistrate or-

dered a country-wide ban on the sale of veal, the staple meat of the Italian diet. French livestock farmers produce half the veal consumed within the European Community.

The French agriculture minister, Pierre Mehaignerie, then led a counterattack, charging the consumer groups with making irresponsible demands and defending the use of natural hormones. But the environmentalist apparatus had the full media cooperation. Europe was flooded with stories of poor little calves snatched from their mothers and raised inhumanely in an industrial fashion. Photos of calves tied into feed boxes filled the newspapers. The idea that eating meat might result in cancer was drummed into the population.

The Brussels-based Bureau of European Consumer Organizations wrote a public letter to European Commission president Roy Jenkins demanding the community-wide ban on hormone use in livestock raising as well as the establishment of a "dangerous products Interpol" to speed up the exchange of information between national customs officials and health authorities.

Existing EC legislation prohibits the addition of hormones to livestock feed, but since most hormones are injected or "implanted," the law is viewed as insufficient. Other health regulations concerning trade in foodstuffs do not deal

with hormone treatment; it remains a subject of national laws which vary considerably.

As in the case of DES in the United States, the facts of hormone use in livestock raising were distorted or ignored. DES had been used successfully in the United States for more than 20 years, its use guided by clear, scientifically based rules. The hormone implant was routinely withdrawn from the animal, for instance, two weeks or so before slaughter, so that no residue would be left in the meat. Residue levels were strictly tested.

The effect of hormone and antibiotic use in animal raising is critical in providing growing numbers of the world's population with adequate supplies of animal protein. Hormone use speeds up the fattening process significantly, and therefore helps to bring down the cost of raising livestock. Use of antibiotics protects the animals' health and assures a quality product.

The outlawing of DES was a disastrous precedent, with potentially deadly consequences in the long run. An attempt to broaden the ban to include the subtherapeutic use of antibiotics has reached the level of Congress, where legislation has been proposed and pushed—unsuccessfully so far.

The EC action will make meat more costly and scarce in countries that do not yet come close to American nutrition standards, especially in terms of animal protein consumption. It could forever seal off that healthy prospect. As some experts point out, the limiting factor as far as French meat production is concerned is good grazing land—a fact that makes the use of additives necessary to sustain a livestock industry at all.