**Some like it raw: Unpasteurized milk has valley following but no legal suppliers here**

**By Rachel Kenley Fry | Posted: Sunday, April 14, 2013**

At her home in Logan, Kymberlee Lawrence, like most Cache Valley residents, enjoys an occasional tall glass of milk. But though her milk is white, frothy, and nearly identical to the milk for sale at the local grocery store, Lawrence’s milk is quite different than what most people consume because it hasn’t been pasteurized.

Lawrence believes raw milk is healthier than pasteurized milk and wishes she could legally buy it in Cache Valley, but studies done by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, show that human consumption of raw milk is highly dangerous and can lead to illness and even death.

**Raw vs. Pasteurized:**

**Pros and Cons**

Pasteurization was discovered by French chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur in 1862, and has been used routinely to sanitize milk in the United States since the 1920s. Pasteurization involves heating milk to a high temperature for a short period of time, which kills disease-causing bacteria.

Proponents of raw milk claim the pasteurization process also kills health promoting bacteria, breaks down enzymes, and results in a less nutritious product. Many people with food intolerances and allergies are able to tolerate raw milk better than pasteurized.

In fact, Bob Ropelato, who runs a dairy in Ogden, began selling certified raw milk in order to be able to legally provide the product to friends with health problems. A friend with stomach cancer drank Ropelato’s raw milk and, while it didn’t prolong his life or cure him, it allowed him to be more comfortable. Ropelato has also heard from his customers that raw milk has helped with Crohn’s disease.

Ropelato also sells pasteurized milk, so he said he doesn’t care which milk his customers buy, as long as they’re purchasing from him. Raw milk sales are profitable, Ropelato said, but that’s not why he does it. *“In ag, you’re never going to be really rich,” he said. “It’s just neat to help people, they really appreciate it.”* Lawrence began drinking raw milk about a month ago, and now, she said she’s hooked on it. Raw milk just made more sense to her, she said. *“I don’t boil my breast milk before I feed it to my baby.”* Since she began drinking raw milk, Lawrence said, she’s noticed an improvement in her allergies and complexion.

Michelle King, a Logan resident, began buying raw milk for her family in 2011 in attempt to fortify her children’s teeth and bones. Her children have multiple food intolerances, and couldn’t drink pasteurized milk.

The benefits, King said, are clear. In 2012, no one in her family got sick, and while she doesn’t know if that’s related to raw milk, it was unusual. In addition she said, it “tastes better than any other milk you’ve ever had.”

While many believe raw milk is superior to its pasteurized counterpart, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, strongly discourages the human consumption of raw milk and products made from it. Raw milk does contain beneficial bacteria, but the risk of getting sick from harmful bacteria, including campylobacter, salmonella, E. coli, and listeria, is great. Beneficial bacteria can be consumed through yogurt, according to the CDC website, which is much safer. Even if you get milk from a very clean dairy, the only way to avoid contamination, according to the CDC, is pasteurization. Milk can become contaminated from cow feces, an undetected infection of a cow’s udder, cow disease, bacteria that live on the skin of cows, the processing equipment, insects, rodents and other animals, and human cross contamination. Pasteurization is necessary for the same reasons that meat should be cooked thoroughly, the website reads.

According to [foodsafety.gov](http://foodsafety.gov/), raw milk “does not kill dangerous pathogens by itself, pasteurizing milk does not cause lactose intolerance and allergic reactions, (and) pasteurization does not reduce milk’s nutritional value.”

Richard Clark, director of the Division of Regulatory Services within the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, said, *“Raw milk is the perfect food. Humans and mammals have survived on it for centuries ... but it’s also perfect for pathogens.”* He explained that before the advent of pasteurization, everyone drank raw milk, but they typically consumed it within a few hours and only a few miles away from the source. Disease outbreaks tied to milk became a huge problem when milk began to be transported long distances.

Mark Gibbons, owner of Gibbons Brothers Dairy in Lewiston and president of the Utah Dairy Producers Association, said raw milk is more popular now because of a popular movement to get back to less-processed, more natural foods. *“(It) has to do with feelings,” he said. “People feel good about doing something they feel is more natural.”* Clark said the problem with this thinking is that people can’t relate to the way the dairy industry was 100 years ago.“*Milk is now one of the safest foods in the United States, when it was one of the most dangerous.”* The CDC reported that between 1998 and 2008, raw milk was responsible for 2,384 illnesses, 284 hospitalizations and two deaths, but that many unreported incidences could mean the numbers are much larger. During the same period, the CDC reported 277 poultry related deaths and 237 deaths from vegetables.The CDC also reported that approximately 3 percent of the American population drinks raw milk. Clark said this information is key to understanding the statistics about the dangers of raw milk. Unpasteurized milk doesn’t make a large number of people sick, he said, because most people don’t drink it. Clark estimates that nearly 100 percent of the population consumes vegetables, explaining the much higher number of deaths. If everyone consumed raw milk, he said, the death rate “would be astronomical.”

Lawrence, and many other raw milk advocates, concluded that raw milk is reported to be much more dangerous than it is. *“I’m willing to take the risk because I think it’s not that big of a risk,”* she said. She also said she thought it was interesting that according to the Food and Drug Administration, aspartame, artificial colors and pesticides are safe, but raw milk isn’t. Ironically, Lawrence pointed out, most dairy producers and their families drink their own unpasteurized milk. Gibbons and Ropelato both admitted they do. Utah Department of Agriculture and Food Deputy Commissioner Kyle Stephens, who also grew up drinking raw milk, said those who grow up on a farm develop an immune system to cope with the bacteria in raw milk, but those removed from the farm are more susceptible.

Alan Young, a dairy specialist with the Utah Cooperative Extension Service, compared drinking raw milk to playing Russian roulette. *“(Getting sick) does happen — not all the time though,”* he said. *“You could be drinking it every day, but one bad batch could make you really, really sick.”* Those particularly susceptible to becoming ill from raw milk, Clark said, are small children and the elderly, and it is those parties that regulation especially seeks to protect. Many advocates argue that as informed adults, they should be allowed to consume raw milk, and get sick from it if they choose, but Clark described this perspective as “egocentric.”

Gibbons said the safeguards exist in order to protect the public and the industry. He explained that the dairy industry has come a long way to establish milk as a safe product, and when there’s an outbreak caused by raw milk, *“It gives the whole industry kind of a black eye.”*

Data from the CDC and state health departments show that raw milk and Mexican-style queso fresco soft cheeses (which are usually made from raw milk) caused almost 70 percent of the reported outbreaks of foodborne disease in dairy products. If pasteurized milk was as risky as raw milk, the website states, the outbreak numbers in pasteurized products should make up a much higher percentage of outbreaks, since a greater percentage of the population consumes them.

While raw milk advocates maintain that raw milk has many benefits that outweigh the potential risks, experts say the science doesn’t back up these claims.

*“Science has proven that the nutrients and the value in raw milk are still there after pasteurization,”* Gibbons said. When processed milk is fortified with vitamin D and other additives, Gibbons said, it’s a much superior product to raw milk. *“The sources cited by people who feel (raw milk is superior) are sources with no scientific credibility,”* Clark said. *“They tend to be scientific looking treatises ... that eloquently portray a point of view. ... There’s nothing we’re aware of to support that point of view.”*

**Raw Milk Regulations in Utah**

According to the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA, 20 states ban the sale of raw milk outright, while the remaining states allow it on a limited basis. The FDA does not have the authority to regulate intrastate raw milk sales, but it did ban interstate raw milk sales in 1987.

Utah currently allows legal raw milk sales. Throughout the state, raw milk can be sold legally by a licensed raw milk producer at a retail site owned by the producer. People who own cows can legally consume their own milk, but can’t sell it legally or even give it away without a license.

Ropelato is the closest licensed raw milk producer to Cache Valley. His milk is sold at his store, Johnny’s Dairy, and delivered to Bingham’s Whole Health store in Tremonton. The regulations imposed on the sale of raw milk are very strict, Ropelato said, and include regular testing of his product to ensure that it is as safe as unpasteurized milk possibly can be. The standards Utah imposes on raw milk are equivalent to national standards for pasteurized milk.

Still, Clark said, *“Utah is one of the most raw milk accessible states in the country.”*

During the last legislative session, Clark said, the Utah Legislature made changes to reduce overhead costs for legal raw milk producers, making certification even easier.

But for raw milk enthusiasts, like Lawrence, Tremonton is too far to go for legal raw milk, and the certification process appears to be prohibitive for Cache Valley dairy farmers.

Many dairymen in Cache Valley and across the state have avoided certification by secretively, and illegally, selling their raw milk. Milk buyers often pick up milk only at specific times, under the cover of darkness, in order to avoid detection.

*“Raw milk is probably harder to get than prescription drugs,”* Lawrence said.

The reasons dairy farmers sell milk illegally vary widely. Ropelato suggested that some dairymen might sell raw milk “under the table” because if their milk causes illness, it’s unlikely that it will be reported or traced to them. If Ropelato’s milk causes an outbreak of illness, however, he will be inspected more heavily and the outbreak will be reported in the media.

Gibbons theorized that Cache Valley farmers don’t get certification to sell raw milk because of the cost involved, and because the market for raw milk wouldn’t support the production.

Young and Clark both said certification isn’t difficult or cost prohibitive for a Grade A dairy that already produces milk for pasteurization. Stephens doesn’t know why a Cache Valley dairy hasn’t taken the initiative to get certification — to meet the needs of those who want raw milk in this area.

However, many dairy producers won’t touch raw milk, said UDAF Milk and Dairy Program Director Cody Huft. They just don’t want to take the risk of making someone sick.

*“If people want to drink raw milk, that’s their business,”* Gibbons said, *“but they need to do it legally, and there are avenues to do that legally.”*

Lawrence and King believe the regulations for legally obtaining raw milk in Cache Valley are too strict. Both women are members of a Facebook group called “Cache Raw Milk Advocates,” which has been working to encourage legislative changes for raw milk restrictions in 2014.

King believes getting milk legally from Tremonton is more dangerous than obtaining it illegally in Cache Valley, since the milk has been transported from a dairy even further away and is not refrigerated during her drive back to Logan. She also believes the government regulations aren’t necessary.

*“Me consuming milk doesn’t hurt anyone else,”* she said. *“Laws should protect us from each other.”*

King, along with other advocates on Facebook, stressed that the issue wasn’t raw milk, necessarily, but her right to choose what she consumes, rather than being forced by the government to eat what’s “legal.” King and other group members have reached out to House 5 Rep. Curt Webb to make their concerns known. According to the Facebook page, Webb will draft a bill to loosen the raw milk regulation, but a phone conversation with him revealed that Webb has had a change of heart on the subject.

*“I was led to believe the state (government) was depriving them of the opportunity (to purchase raw milk),”* Webb said. After researching the matter, he said, *“I have to admit that unless there’s something I’m missing, I was wrong. ... I don’t think the government regulations on this are unrealistic. The state has taken a reasonable approach.” Not being able to obtain raw milk legally in Cache Valley is due to the fact that no farmer has chosen to provide it,* Webb said, *and not because of government regulations*.

**Farmers’ Stances**

Raw milk is a divisive issue not only among state residents and their respective governments, but also among milk producers themselves. During their annual meetings earlier this year, the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union, who both claim to represent the American Farmer, issued opposite statements concerning the sales of raw milk.

The National Farmers Union endorsed a pro-raw milk stance during their national convention in March, even going so far as to endorse the interstate shipment of raw milk. The policy supports the sale of raw milk because “it provides a viable market niche for dairies” in a difficult economic climate.

The American Farm Bureau delegates, during its annual meeting in January, on the other hand, approved a policy stating that only pasteurized milk and milk products should be sold for human consumption, citing risks to public health as the reason.

Gibbons said he thinks farmers are generally against the sale of raw milk, but was surprised to learn that the American Farm Bureau had come out entirely against its sale. Gibbons said he believed the Utah Farm Bureau had recently issued a statement in favor of raw milk. The differences of opinions arise because of the vast differences in sizes and natures of dairy farms, he said.

**The Future**

Utah raw milk regulations attempt to please both pro- and anti-raw milk factions, by allowing, but strictly regulating, the sale of raw milk. Young and Gibbons said the state has reached a happy medium.

*“The way we’re handling it is as good as you can get,” Young said. “This is a way to keep it all above board but still maintain some semblance of safety.”*

Ropelato disagreed, and said that the regulation in Utah is still too strict. He compared drinking raw milk to smoking, a dangerous activity that is still legal for adults who choose to participate in it. Ropelato hopes the government will be more open-minded in the future and allow dairies to provide raw milk with less stringent certification measures.

King admits that her opinions on food regulation are radical, but she’d like to see private industry take over the regulation of food without government intervention.

“We need to put the responsibility back on the market and on the people,” she said.

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