Maryland Committee Delays Plan to Allow Raw Milk Sales

NICK TABOR, Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — A proposal to legalize raw milk sales in Maryland has been pushed back another year. The bill's chief sponsor hopes a report from Johns Hopkins University will give it the necessary push in 2015.

Del. James Hubbard withdrew his bill on Monday. He said it was clear the House Health and Government Operations Committee wouldn't vote on the issue during these last two weeks of the legislative session.

But in December, the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins will give a thorough report on the scientific literature surrounding raw milk. Hubbard, a Democrat from Prince George's County, said this will give better perspective on whether it poses a public health hazard.

Twelve states allow raw milk sales in stores, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Another 18, including Virginia, allow sales through venues like farmers markets and herd-share programs,

If it truly posed serious risks, it probably wouldn't be legal throughout so much of the country, Hubbard said.

The bill Hubbard filed this year would have let consumers buy shares of cow herds and receive the unpasteurized milk.

Pasteurization consists of heating milk to kill bacteria. Raw milk advocates say it also kills or damages the nutrients, and many say milk tastes richer and creamier unpasteurized.

In a committee hearing in January, Patrick Crawford, an Annapolis attorney, said he buys raw milk from a Pennsylvania farm. When he gave some to his sister last year, she said it was the best milk she'd ever tasted. Her kids' allergic reactions have diminished since they started drinking it, he said.

However, Dr. Katherine Feldman, who works in the state health department's infectious diseases bureau, said milk is conducive to the growth of bacteria, so it can contain organisms like salmonella and E. coli before pasteurization.

"Pasteurization is the cornerstone of milk safety and a triumph of public health," she told the committee.

States that allow it to be sold for human consumption tend to have twice as many outbreaks of milk-related diseases, she said.

In 2006, six California children developed E. coli after drinking raw milk, and three were hospitalized, Feldman said. Last year 36 people in Alaska had infections after drinking it.

Del. Nic Kipke, R-Anne Arundel, said the state should let consumers take the risk if they want to. Alcohol, oysters and tanning all pose health risks but remain legal, he said.

Raw milk advocates often point out that even cigarettes, which have no nutritional benefit, are easy to find at stores.

Hubbard said the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has instilled the "fear of God" in residents concerning raw milk. He expects the Johns Hopkins study to help change perceptions. He also lamented the influence of the dairy industry, which has opposed his bill all along.

Similar bills have come up in six or more consecutive years, Kipke said.

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