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Flaking paint forces dairyman to buy store milk

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Billy Dillman never drank store-bought milk in his life.

His family always got it straight from the cow.

Now his cows aren't giving milk, and Dillman is forced to buy it. It's an ironic expense which he can ill afford.

THE PREBLE County farmer's dairy operation is as idle as his 320 acres of land which lie barren in the cold. It will be spring before Dillman can try to rebuild the milk business which had netted $24,000 a year.

In the meantime, he has all winter to nurse his discontent.

State health officials last August ordered him to stop selling milk because they said it was contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyl chemicals (PCBs). The Journal Herald reported the closing in October.

What has happend since he shut down his dairy?

"Not really nothing," Dillman said. "The cows are still there, just like they were before. We're still feeding them. They asked us not to sell them before this spring.

"OF COURSE, we quit milking them back in October. You should milk them. But if we started milking them now, they wouldn't give any milk anyhow, they'd be so full of scar tissue."

The course of the contamination started in Dillman's silo, where a sealing paint containing PCB's broke down and spread into his feed.

The silage contaminated his 45 cows, who in turn contaminated their milk. The farmer can't prove it, but he's sure the milk is the fault of illnesses which have hit his family.

Twelve-year-old Mike, his son is on crutches because he has a bone infection in his leg. Dillman thinks that PCBs in his milk crippled his liver, like health officials say it is supposed to do. The weakened liver failed to produce enough white blood cells to fight off the bone infection, the farmer says.

BUT HE CAN'T get anyone to perform blood samples which would prove that PCBs did the damage.

"They say there's no way to prove what it is. We tried to get these blood samples, my mother's and my son's, tried to get them to a laboratory someplace to have them tested for these PCBs. And we couldn't get nobody who would do it.

"They claim that it's harmful to human beings. How do they know if they're not set up to test for it? That's what beats me," Dillman said.

Mike spent Christmas with his grandparents in Houston, Tex., where Dillman's mother is undergoing outpatient treatment for a mouth infection at Houston Clinic. Dillman thinks the PCBs are at fault for that, too. But he says the Texas doctors can't prove it, either.

THEY STAY with Houston relatives ("They wouldn't be down there if they weren't. It would cost money.") Gives Dillman's father, his partner in the farm, "time to think it over" about father, his partner in the farm, "time to think it over" about the ruin of his business.

"Take al the income away from anybody, and how is it going to affect him?" Dillman asked. "He's going to be bitter, especially when there's nothing he can do about it."

About the only thing for Dillman to do after the state closed his milk sales was to try to find another way to make money.

"I went totally without an income until just before Thanksgiving, when I went to work down at Miami University in security," he said.

IT'S A decent job, but it's not a highpaying job. You take somebody who's known nothing but farms all his life, where ar you going to get work at $4 to $6 an hour? Those kind of jobs don't come along everyday."

The farmer said that "the banks have been real good to us through all this and helped us out," but they couldn't replace Santa Claus.

"Christmas was very slim. If you don't have enough money, you just don't do it. What I make down at the university is just enough to buy grub and pay a few little bills, and that's about it," he said.

Dillman isn't worried only about the doctors' inability to identify PCBs as poisons but about how many other contaminated silos are still unchecked throughout the state.

"YOU KNOW there are umpteen more of them across the state of Ohio," he asserted.

The culprit PCB in the silo sealer is manufactured by the Monsanto Co. Dillman and his father's attorney are "negotiating" with the St. Louis-based company to see if he can obtain an out-of-court settlement.

Dillman isn't sure if his herd has decontaminated itself by eating other feed yet or not.

"The inspector was out here about four weeks ago. He wanted a sample, and I wouldn't give him a sample or nobody else one because I said I'd quit milking and the heck with him."

HIS INVESTMENT in dairy equipment is what makes the farmer reluctant to drop milk

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production entirely and switch to fattening hogs or steers.

So when his cows are decontaminated, he'll sell them for slaughter.

"We plan to sell them in April. Usually, cattle are up in April, at a decent price," he said.

Then he'll try to start over.

"I can get back into business next fall. I've got 16 head of heifers that weren't contaminated. But getting back on my feet is going to be a long, drawn-out affair, getting it all paid back to the banks.

"I'd just been farming for four-and-a-half years when this hit me. I was just getting to the point where I was fairly well on my feet.

"YOU DON'T just start farming and wind up with a pile of money after the first year. It just don't work like that. It takes years to get on your feet."

Until spring, Dillman will do his best as a university security guard to provide for his wife and three sons, pay his bills and buy his milk.

"We always used raw milk, straight from the cow. We took pride in our milk, trying to keep it clean. Our bacteria count never amounted to anything but once in the whole 14 years of milking on this farm.

"If this hadn't come up," he said, looking at his 14-month-old son toddle around the room, "he'd probably have been raised on it just like the others were.

"We drank all our own milk, never bought any. It's expensive now."

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