

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Counterattack against green lies

Legislative initiatives would levy financial penalties against those who spread scare stories about food.

Colorado is the first state to adopt legislation that will give food producers the right to sue those who make "reckless and unfounded claims" about certain foods. The legislation passed the House in February and the Senate in March.

The act, Concerning the Creation of a Cause of Action for the Disparagement of Perishable Agricultural Food Products, was sponsored by Rep. Steve Acquafresca, a Democrat and an apple grower.

The statute would encourage food safety critics to "deal only in the truth" and "to deal with scientific facts instead of emotion," Acquafresca told *The Produce News* Feb. 23. He referenced the Alar controversy as an example of the damage disparaging remarks could have on a product.

Beginning two years ago, a propaganda campaign against Alar, a chemical used to assist the maturation of apples, caused public panic over its safety, and the apple industry nationwide lost up to \$170 million in canceled orders before federal officials publicly confirmed that the alarm over alleged health hazards had been overstated.

Acquafresca emphasizes that because perishable crops have a short shelf-life, unfounded rumors create a "potential for destroying entire agricultural economies."

As of late March, Colorado Gov. Roy Romer had not said whether he would sign the bill, but the initiative is welcome among farmers and food handlers in other states. There are pitched battles over use of agricultural chemicals in Maine, Washington, and

other states.

Punitive, anti-defamation legislation to defend food is under consideration in New Jersey, where the lies of anti-nuclear environmentalists about food irradiation created such a climate of fear that legislators banned the sale of irradiated food products in the state.

One of the main anti-nuclear propaganda groups in New Jersey, "Food and Water," built its organization on scare stories, including leaflets with cartoons of children being poisoned by a food irradiation "witch." Recently, Food and Water was notified by an attorney for the Florida Department of Citrus to "cease and desist" the false use of the department's name in connection with its anti-food irradiation campaign. Food and Water had reported in its newsletter that the Florida Citrus Commission opposed food irradiation and pledged to avoid this process—both of which statements are false.

With an anti-disparagement law on the books, groups like Food and Water might think twice before printing lies, and producers would have some recourse.

Under the proposed Colorado law, those who cast needless doubt on the safety of a product would be subject to a lawsuit for up to three times the cost of lost sales traceable to such disparagement.

Candidates for such suits would be the likes of actress Meryl Streep, who testified to Congress on her fears over Alar and demanded that only "organic" apple juice be served to children.

Within weeks of her Capitol Hill appearance—pre-arranged months in advance by the Rodale Institute-affiliated public relations company in Washington, D.C.—local school districts canceled orders and servings of apples for school lunches. Too many moms who follow whatever Hollywood says believed Streep's unfounded acting job.

The idea for "truth in advertising" laws to apply to the environmentalist lobby has been promoted in recent years by Dr. J. Gordon Edwards, professor of entomology at San Jose State University in California, and a 41-year veteran of work on protecting people, plants, and livestock against pests.

In a 1990 interview, Edwards said, "We are victimized daily by untruthful propaganda and solicitations by organizations whose main business is environmentalism. The Alar hoax by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Chilean grape fiasco were two recent examples."

In the 1970s, Edwards battled hard to prevent the banning of DDT, whose continued, properly applied use would have wiped out malaria by wiping out the mosquito vectors that transmit the disease. Instead, malaria has taken the lives of millions.

The decision against DDT was made by Environmental Protection Agency director William Ruckelshaus, who admitted at the time that his decision was political and not based on scientific considerations.

"The question of Truth in Environmentalism is not an academic issue but one of life and death for much of the world's population," Edwards stressed. "If untruths are allowed to proliferate, then propaganda about a wide range of issues from pesticides to protecting dolphins may translate into legislation that directly kills human beings."