

Corruption and Pork – Agricultural Boards Behaving Badly

Pork. The other white meat. The incredible, edible egg. Beef. It's what's for dinner.

The majority of Americans are probably familiar with these slogans. But have you ever heard, "Pork: Be Inspired?" Probably not, despite the three million dollar licensing fee that the slogan has incurred each year from 2011 on.

What is the point of the slogan, and who has that kind of money to burn? The United States Department of Agriculture Research and Promotion (R and P) programs.

What Are They and Should I Care?

The pork industry is not the only agricultural industry to have its own board formed as part of the R and P. There are more than 20 agricultural products that have been classified by the USDA as research and promotion programs under the Agricultural Marketing Services department, from expected products like soybeans, dairy, beef, and eggs to potential head scratchers like sorghum and mangos. These R and P programs are set up and funded by the farmers in the industries they represent through set charges on specific amounts of units sold. An initial look at the programs shows their benefit in creating a demand and building a brand for a specific commodity, but there have been increasing concerns about a growing lack of transparency and the potential promotion of the interests of large producers at the expense of smaller farmers. There is also a concern about how close these organizations are to the taxpayer-funded USDA. Are our taxes promoting industries that are causing many of our health

and environmental problems?

Questionable Decisions

If you've paid attention to the world of mayonnaise lately (and let's face it, who hasn't), you might have heard of a small startup called Hampton Creek being sued for misleading the public by Unilever, the maker of Hellmann's mayonnaise. While Unilever dropped the lawsuit, the FDA pursued the matter, claiming they were following up a complaint and that Hampton Creek's product, Just Mayo, cannot be labeled as mayonnaise because the product doesn't contain eggs. A little investigation revealed emails from the National Egg Board executives that were targeting the company in ways both benign and malicious, from jokes about having "old buddies from Brooklyn" paying the Hampton Creek CEO a visit to a program promoting real eggs and contacting Whole Foods in an attempt to have the product removed from shelves. There is also the fact that Unilever reached out to the Egg Board for support during their lawsuit, leading to speculation that the Egg Board used its influence to convince the FDA to focus on Hampton Creek and Just Mayo.

While much of this seems to be within the guidelines of the R and P programs stated promotion goals, specifically calling retailers to get a competing product off the shelves has raised some eyebrows. It is troubling when an association linked to the USDA feels comfortable blocking the free market, proving that America capitalist preachings come hand in hand with rampant corruption. When the agency managed by the USDA spurs the FDA into action at the behest of an international corporation determined to eliminate a small startup, what chance does anyone else have when government is for the few?

A Mismanagement of Funds

The majority of people want to get their money's worth when they pay for goods or services. The National Pork Board is not in this majority. Originally, they were licensing their previous popular slogan, "Pork. The other white meat." from the National Pork Producers Council for a dollar a year. That cost increased to 818,000 in 2004 and then jumped to an incredible 20 year, 60 million dollar contract despite the lack of competition for the slogan and an actual market value of under 400,000 dollars. Though the Pork Board has retired the slogan, they continue to pay a yearly 3 million dollar fee to the NPPC. For farmers required to pay 40 cents for every 100 dollars they make to the Pork Board, that particular expense must sting quite a bit.

But even more interesting is who the money is going to and how it's pushing out small farmers. The National Pork Producers Council is responsible for licensing the slogan and receives the yearly fees from the National Pork Board. The NPPC is a lobby group dedicated to lobbying political candidates on behalf of large-scale pig operations with environmentally detrimental policies. Despite trying to eliminate the program in the early 2000s, small farmers are still stuck with a government system that ignores their needs and lacks the necessary oversight to correct itself.

Can You Actually Do Anything?

Government shouldn't actively work against the people who pay for it. The idea behind the USDA's Research and Promotion Programs is sound, but the lack of actual transparency and oversight make it an easy target for corporate corruption. The transparency issue also makes it difficult for consumers to understand what's going on and to sort through myriad information, studies, and advertisements that serve to forward the agendas of Big Agriculture. Knowing about the dirty

business taking place immediately beyond the public's eye makes it even more important to support small farmers and to know where your food is coming from. You can make a difference by choosing products from small farms committed to animal welfare, the environment, and health.

Recommended Reading:

- *Hellmann's Vs. Just Mayo – The Very Interesting Battle Within the Mayo Industry*
- *Why Are We Accepting Less Healthy, Lower Quality Options From Food Companies?*

Sources:

- *Eggless Mayo Causes Heartbreak – U.S. News*
- *American Egg Board Targets Vegan Mayo Start-Up – Take Part*
- *A \$60 Million Pork Kickback? – Politico*
- *Research and Promotion – United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Services*