Policy Pennings

By Daryll Ray

Have you heard that the Obama administration is considering treating spills from milk tankers in the same way that spills from gasoline tankers are treated?

We have heard that as well, only it turns out that it is not true.

That reminds of when we were teenagers in the era before the widespread availability of illegal drugs.

The story passing among high school boys—and maybe girls as well—was that if you put an aspirin in a Coke and drank it you would get drunk. That did not make much sense to us, but there were those who insisted that it was absolutely true.

And then there were those persistent rumors that moon and stars symbol, used by Proctor and Gamble since the nineteenth century, was an attempt to spread Satanic worship.

We first heard them in the 1970s and they were no more true then, than they are today.

What do these stories have in common?

They are all examples of what some call “urban legends,” though as we have seen they are not confined to urban areas. They are all false. And despite being false, these stories continued to be widely circulated, often for decades.

Most “urban legends” are sustained by gullibility, fear, and/or those with an agenda, be it economic, political, or religious.

Certainly, the Coke and aspirin story was sustained by the gullibility of teenage boys who wanted to appear more worldly-wise in the eyes of their classmates.

Some urban legends like Coke and aspirin are relatively costless while others have an economic toll.

Proctor and Gamble eventually had to abandon their historic logo after more than 30 years of attempting to quench the rumor with education and a court case.

Government agencies have spent countless hours dealing with phone calls and petitions about issues that were not on the agenda.

The issue with regard to “urban legends” about agricultural issues — that sounds like a oxymoron — has become such a distraction from the discussion of the substantial issues facing agriculture that Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack made a post on the USDA Blog on Friday August 19, 2011 titled “Separating fact from fiction on Obama administration’s farm policies.”

The blog was in response to an opinion piece in the August 18, 2011, issue of the Wall Street Journal.

Secretary Vilsack writes, “Sadly, rumors and misconceptions have become the norm, not the exception, especially when it comes to regulations and the Obama administration’s work on agriculture.

First, it was that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was considering treating spilled milk like an oil spill. Not true.

In terms of water regulations, EPA has made it clear that recent rules do not seek to regulate land that occasionally ponds during heavy rains.

“The opinion piece also mentions the regulation of farm dust. This is another frequently repeated myth based on a congressionally-mandated review that the EPA has conducted every 5 years for decades.”

In the blog, he also said, “And the Department of Transportation announced just last week that it has no intention of proposing any new regulations or rules on the transport of agricultural products, farm machinery, or farm supplies to or from a farm.”

While we are not willing to speculate on the motivation of those who circulate these stories, we do hope that those who hear them will use at least one of the many websites that track down their truthfulness.

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