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## **Victory for California Families: Governor Should Sign New Bill to Protect Parents' Right to Know**

### ***Statement of Anna Blackshaw, Director of Public Citizen's California Office***

OAKLAND, Calif. –The California Legislature has served up a big win to parents and students by passing a bill requiring school board approval, public disclosure and parental notification before irradiated foods can be purchased for school lunch programs.

Assemblymember Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley) is largely to thank for authoring the legislation (AB 1988), which protects parents' right to know what their children eat at school and provides a democratic decision-making process for a highly controversial issue that has concerned parents across the state. Given the scientific uncertainty over the safety of irradiated foods and their wide-scale rejection by consumers, it is important to involve parents in decisions regarding food their children will be served.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture included irradiated foods in the National School Lunch Program in May 2003, despite overwhelming opposition from parents and the public. Under federal law, schools have no obligation to inform parents that their children are eating irradiated foods. This lack of accountability to parents is particularly egregious because the National School Lunch Program serves 27 million children annually nationwide, most of whom are from low-income families and may be undernourished at home. More than three million children are served by the program in California.

Six California school districts have banned irradiated food from their cafeterias: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berkeley, Ukiah, Point Arena and the Grant Elementary School District in Redding. While no school in the state will serve irradiated meat in the upcoming school year, doing so will remain an option for California school districts for the foreseeable future. By passing this bill, lawmakers have ensured that California remains accountable to both parents and disadvantaged schoolchildren, who are among the most vulnerable of our state's residents.

Irradiation exposes food to high doses of ionizing radiation to kill bacteria. In the process, nutrients are destroyed and new toxic chemicals are formed. Recent research has shown that one class of these chemicals, cyclobutanones, promotes cancer development and causes genetic damage to human cells. No long-term studies have been conducted on how children's health is affected by eating irradiated food.

This bill will now head to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. We urge him to sign it to preserve parents' and students' right to know what is served in school meals. To learn more about irradiated foods and their inclusion in the National School Lunch Program, visit [www.safelunch.org](http://www.safelunch.org).

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Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization with an office in Oakland, Calif.