



Irradiation and International Trade: Increasing Corporate Control Over the Global Food Supply

Around the globe, multinational corporations such as Philip Morris/Kraft, Del Monte foods, and even Mitsubishi are planning to use irradiation to increase their global reach. Why? Irradiation doubles or triples the shelf life of food products, kills invasive insects on fruits and vegetables, and masks the contamination that is the result of industrialized meat production.

Multinational food corporations are interested in growing more fruits and vegetables in the developing world – where labor is cheap and agricultural chemicals are, in many cases, virtually unregulated. Irradiation not only allows food to be shipped over longer distances due to increased shelf life, it also kills insects and other invasive species that are considered “barriers to trade.”

Irradiation is also promoted as a replacement for methyl bromide, a fumigant used to control insects, weeds and pathogens on more than 100 crops, which is being phased out because it depletes the ozone layer and causes other environmental damage.

Countries such as Mexico, Israel, Hungary, South Africa, and China are planning to use irradiation on agricultural products. Likewise, the U.S., France and the Netherlands – the three highest-value agricultural exporters in the world – are planning to use irradiation for many types of food.

The meat industry is also promoting irradiation as a way to kill the bacteria remaining on meat. Animals live in disgusting, crowded conditions and are butchered in dirty meat processing

plants – sometimes while they’re still alive – with fast-moving and inhumane slaughterlines. Instead of ensuring that meat is free of feces, urine, pus and vomit, meat companies want to mask these unhygienic conditions by using irradiation to kill food-borne pathogens.

Irradiation advances the industrialization of our food supply, thus enabling large corporations to gain more command and control over the entire world’s food supply. To maximize their profits, multinational meat companies including Cargill/Excel, IBP and Tyson are using their influence in international trade negotiations to promote irradiation.

Family farmers and small food producers cannot compete with corporate farms, where workers are under-paid and exploited. Industrialized corporate food operations also treat the soil and water as commodities available to exploit for the purpose of making a profit.

Trade agreements that promote global food trade increase the pressure on small food producers. As a result, independent farmers are losing their land and are forced to move to cities, where they live in poverty and are often coerced into working in sweatshops – if they are able to find work at all.

Irradiated Food = Unsafe and Nutritionally Deficient Food

Irradiation blasts food with the equivalent radiation of hundreds of millions of chest X-rays. These high levels of radiation initiate a complex sequence of reactions that literally rip apart the

molecular structure of the food. This process creates new and unidentified chemicals that have not been proven safe. One such chemical, known as 2-DCB, has been shown to cause cellular and/or genetic damage in rats and in human cell cultures. This chemical has never been found naturally in any food on Earth. Ironically, it is a well-known “marker” for determining whether food has been irradiated.

Irradiated food is also depleted of its nutritional content. For instance – according to the FDA’s own scientists – irradiation destroys up to 80 percent of the vitamin A in eggs and half of the beta-carotene in orange juice. This problem is compounded by lengthened shelf life, because as food sits in storage, its nutritional content declines. If irradiated foods are stored longer and shipped further from the farm, these foods will arrive at the dinner table with nearly no nutritional value. Everyone will be eating plastic food.

New Laws Provide Cover

More than 140 nations will soon be allowed to irradiate food (at any dose), trade it “freely” with any other country (whether they want to import it or not), and serve it to people who might not know that the food they’re eating could make them sicker than the pathogens that irradiation is intended to kill.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, created in 1961, is an unaccountable international body that creates global standards for globalized food trade. Under the innocuous-sounding policy of “harmonization,” the Codex Commission – whose members are neither elected nor subject to removal by citizens – has been instrumental in breaking down trade “barriers” to promote “free” trade in agricultural products. Under harmonization, England, for example, would not be allowed to block food imports from France if its own food safety laws are stricter.

In the case of food irradiation, it’s the United States that’s trying to lower the standards of countries that have banned or strictly limited the production, sale and/or importation of irradiated food, such as Japan and most member nations of the European Union.

The International Consultative Group on

Food Irradiation (ICGFI) is another secretive body of decision-makers that is promoting the use of food irradiation. Like Codex, ICGFI meets behind closed doors and has undemocratically chosen leaders, many of whom work within or have close ties with private industry.

On Nov. 3, 2000, ICGFI decided in a private meeting in Geneva that any food could be safely irradiated at any dose – without studying, much less identifying, the chemical compounds formed by high-dose irradiation. This decision now goes to the Codex, which could adopt it as the official global standard within two years.

Adding yet another layer of undemocratic behavior to the pile, ICGFI, which has 46 member nations (including the U.S., Brazil, South Korea, and China, all of which are proponents of irradiation), helps set food safety standards for the World Trade Organization, which has more than 140 member nations.

Tellingly, ICGFI approved high-dose irradiation without a quorum (have a majority of members present); only 24 of 45 member nations were represented at the meeting.

The Big Picture

Globalization of food safety and food quality standards means that citizens will have little control over the food they eat. Global agribusinesses will exert their influence on these international bodies, as they will be the only ones that can afford to play on the international stage. In the name of promoting free trade, hard-fought consumer protections will either be weakened or eliminated entirely.

Some countries, fearful that their consumers might be forced to eat irradiated, genetically modified and other harmful foods, have called for the implementation of the “precautionary principle” as a way to protect their sovereignty over food safety issues. Thus far, however, the United States has opposed this policy, arguing that it would impede free trade.



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