



The Revolving Door: When Public Employees Defect to the Food Irradiation Industry

There's nothing new about government officials and university professors leaving their public-sector jobs and going to work for private companies. Needless to say, people with such expertise are valuable commodities in the corporate world. They can easily double or triple their salaries. In some cases, they can name their price.

Just as this commonly occurs in the defense, utility and health care industries, the "revolving door" syndrome is alive and well in the food irradiation industry. Thinking they've paid their dues long enough on the public payroll, bureaucrats and professors are now cashing in by going to work for the companies that, in the case of government officials, they once regulated or, in the case of professors, they once studied.

Here are some classic examples of this phenomenon, and some of the reasons why Americans who are concerned about the safety and wholesomeness of our food supply have even more cause to worry.

Richard Hunter

Richard Hunter is a textbook example of the revolving door that exists between government and private industry.

In September 2001, Hunter resigned as deputy health officer of the Florida Department of Health to become president and CEO of Food Technology Service, a food irradiation company located near Tampa. However many unsettling questions it may raise, the move was not surprising, given the high-profile role that Hunter played in promoting food irradiation while working on the government clock.

While in the state's employ, Hunter championed food irradiation at numerous food industry conferences, and in numerous industry press releases and newspaper articles – especially in

those issued by or written about his future employer. In 1998 he went so far as to write a letter to Florida residents promoting food irradiation, a letter that Food Technology Service since began using in its marketing material.

In June 2000, when one of Food Technology Service's main clients began selling irradiated beef in Florida, Hunter said: "Consumers now have the option of purchasing irradiated products and putting the safest food available on their families tables."¹

When reports surfaced in August 2000 that some stores in Florida had stopped selling beef irradiated by Food Technology Service, Hunter responded by saying that the stores "should be commended for being among the first in the nation to offer irradiated beef to the people of

Florida and I hope more will do the same.”²

When several Congress members from Florida in November 1999 called for more taxpayer-funded “consumer education” of irradiated food, in cooperation with the Department of Health and Food Technology Service, Hunter said: “As public health officials, we have a duty to advocate irradiation as an additional step in the food safety process... I hope consumers will purchase irradiated chicken and ground beef as they become available.”³

‘I hope consumers will purchase irradiated chicken and ground beef as they become available.’

Richard Hunter,
former deputy health officer,
Florida Department of Health

Hunter has also publicly criticized organizations and citizens who are concerned about the health and safety of irradiated food. He has accused them of using “false claims,” “scare tactics,” “selective science” and “meaningless comparisons;” and espousing “theories of government conspiracy and corruption” in an effort to “discredit irradiated foods.”⁴

Hunter is being rewarded for his loyalty to the food irradiation industry, and to Food Technology Service in particular. As the company’s new president and CEO, he will earn \$100,000 a year and be given 100,000 shares of stock, worth about \$160,000.⁵

Dennis Olson

In the mold of Richard Hunter, Dennis Olson is a textbook example of the revolving door that exists between academia and private industry.

For 15 years, Olson taught and researched food safety at Iowa State University in Ames. He was a professor of animal science, food science and human nutrition. He was the director of the school’s Utilization Center for Agricultural Products, which includes a linear accelerator (used to irradiate food) and a meat export research center. And he was professor-in-charge of the school’s meat laboratory.⁶

Olson has had more than a dozen articles about food safety published in scientific journals, and is frequently called upon by government officials and food industry executives to provide

information about irradiation and other food safety issues.

Though he has always been tight with the food industry, Olson became much tighter after attending the October 1999 grand opening of an “electron beam” irradiation facility in nearby Sioux City owned by the Titan Corp., a San Diego-based defense contractor that has adapted linear accelerators originally designed for the “Star Wars” program to irradiate food.

“The SureBeam technology is as safe as a microwave oven,” Olson told *Futures World News* the day after the opening.⁷ The affair was also attended by two of Congress’ most active irradiation proponents, Sen. Tom Harkin and Rep. Tom Latham, both from Iowa, as well as Tyson Foods Chairman John Tyson.⁸

Less than a year later, in May 2000, Olson left Iowa State to become vice president for research of SureBeam, Titan’s recently spun-off food irradiation subsidiary.⁹

As he moved closer to the food irradiation industry, Olson seemed to move further away from the truth about the technology.

In 1998, while still a professor at Iowa State, he stated outright that irradiation causes chemical changes in food, including the formation of volatile (unstable) chemicals: “It’s fairly clear that these volatiles exist in irradiated products but not in unirradiated products. When you open [the] package, you can smell those volatiles. We’re trying to determine what these compounds are and where they come from – whether they come from the meat or the packaging material.”¹⁰

‘The SureBeam technology is as safe as a microwave oven.’

Dennis Olson,
former food science and
human nutrition professor,
Iowa State University

Three years later, however, as an employee of SureBeam, Olson presented a different message during a speech at the “Food Irradiation 2001” conference in Washington, D.C. Food can be irradiated, he said to an audience of several hundred industry executives and government officials, “without changing the nature of the food.”¹¹

Olson made this assertion despite having

co-authored several journal articles – one as recent as 2000 – that document the chemical changes that irradiated food undergoes, including the formation of compounds such as hexane, which is suspected to cause birth defects and damage the central nervous system.¹²

Morton Satin

You can't talk about the international food irradiation movement without talking about Morton Satin.

Satin runs the Agricultural Industries and Post-Harvest Management Service for the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). He and his department are actively involved in promoting food irradiation, especially in the developing world.

Satin is also FAO's representative to the International Consultative Group on Food Irradiation (ICGFI), a secretive, quasi-governmental body that recommends food irradiation policies to the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which sets food safety standards for more than 160 countries.

'Misunderstandings about the risks and benefits of irradiation are preventing it from being widely used.'

Morton Satin,

United Nations official and future executive director, International Food and Agribusiness Management Association

Satin has made no secret of his fondness for food irradiation. He wrote recently: "Misunderstandings about the risks and benefits of irradiation are preventing it from being widely used as it should be in efforts to provide a safe food supply in the developing world... To the extent that centralized processing can be carried out on hazardous commodities, food irradiation should be promoted actively wherever possible."¹³

Satin's personal financial interests have never been far from his job of feeding the world. He is noted as the inventor of high-fiber white bread and wheatless bread. He also developed a sterilization process that resulted in the first patent ever awarded to the FAO. The patent is for a micro-filtration process to preserve coconut water, a popular drink in many tropical countries. Satin

aims to market coconut water as a natural sports drink, a contender in the world's \$1 billion market for these products.

In January 2002 Satin will make the leap to the private sector. He will become executive director of the International Food and Agribusiness Management Association, which is housed at Texas A&M University.

IAMA boasts of being "the only organization that brings industry leaders from all segments of the global food chain together with the teaching and researching faculties of over 100 institutions from around the world and government policy makers to discuss issues that impact the global food system." IAMA is a "non-profit educational organization" that includes members of industry, government and academia.¹⁴ Translation: It's a one-stop lobbying point for irradiation.

Satin will no doubt use this platform to extol the virtues of food irradiation and "educate" all parties involved. Like other governmental officials and academics who seem overly concerned with sales trends, he once said: "Consumers will purchase irradiated foods, particularly when they are made aware of the improved hygienic quality of the food."¹⁵

Edward Josephson

Edward Josephson went from a career in the U.S. Army that ended ignominiously to single-handedly persuading the Food and Drug Administration, three decades later, to legalize the irradiation of eggs.

Josephson oversaw the food irradiation lab at the Army's Research and Development Laboratories in Natick, Mass., from 1962 to 1972. It was during his tenure that the Army's food irradiation program went from a pioneering institution that helped feed the war effort in Vietnam to a public disgrace.

The Army was well on its way toward solving the problem of shipping food halfway around the world without worrying about spoilage when, in 1963, it received permission from the FDA to irradiate bacon and serve it to military personnel. Five years later, however, the permission was rescinded after the FDA finally saw the raw data from the Army's bacon research.¹⁶ It wasn't pretty.

Then-FDA Commissioner James Goddard described the problems in a letter to Army officials. Rats fed irradiated bacon and fruit suffered a 23 percent reduction in live births – "adverse effects on the animal reproduction process," he wrote,

"that are highly unlikely to be due to chance." In other tests, animals died younger, gained less weight, had lower red blood cell counts, and developed more malignant tumors, including pituitary cancer. "Since this is a rarely occurring type of cancer," he wrote, "this could be very significant."¹⁷

Despite such a grim picture, Josephson maintained the validity of the Army's research: "If there were any reservations as to the safety of irradiation processing," he told the subcommittee, "the program would surely not have been carried through to its current state of development."¹⁸

'If there were any reservations as to the safety of irradiation, the program would surely not have been carried through.'

Edward Josephson,
former food irradiation director,
U.S. Army Laboratories, Natick, Mass.

The Army never did recover from the fiasco. After the private company it hired to continue the research was fired after doing shoddy work,¹⁹ the Army completely dropped its food irradiation research program in 1980.

Josephson went on to teach at MIT and the University of Rhode Island, and to serve as science advisor to the Rhode Island House of Representatives.²⁰

In 1998, Josephson re-entered the food irradiation arena when he asked the FDA to legalize the irradiation of eggs. Though Josephson did not submit any scientific data on the safety and wholesomeness of irradiated eggs, the FDA approved his request in July 2000.²¹

Benefits to the food irradiation industry manifested immediately.

Six days after the FDA ruling, Florida egg producer Hillandale Farms announced it would start selling eggs irradiated by Food Technology Service.²² The majority stockholder in Food Technology service is Ottawa-based MDS Nordion, the world's largest supplier of radioactive cobalt-60, which is used in dozens of irradiation facilities worldwide.²³

An MDS spokesperson hailed the ruling, saying "it is clear that momentum is building as more and more foods are allowed to be irradiated."²⁴

Michael Daysh

Michael Daysh is among Australia's leading proponents of food irradiation. He is adept at merging government and industry interests, having honed his skills while serving as an "Industry Market Development Manager" in the Australian Department of Primary Industry.

While working for the Queensland Horticulture Institute, a cohort of his attended an ICGFI workshop on opportunities to trade in food irradiation, and as a result, they both advised the Australian government to irradiate tropical produce to kill fruit flies.²⁵

After visiting SureBeam headquarters in San Diego last year, Daysh was hired to lead the company's nascent Australian operation. SureBeam wants to build an irradiation plant in Northern Australia, and boasts a highly competitive business plan to export irradiated exotic fruits to the U.S. and New Zealand. Australian officials say the country could export up to 15,320 tons of tropical fruit to the two countries each year.²⁶

According to stockholders in the lychee and longon fruit industry, Daysh is attempting to influence the public perception of irradiation in order to boost sales of irradiated goods.²⁷ Furthermore, Daysh's research for the Australian government has yielded new market opportunities for rambutan fruit in the U.S., Canada, England and Japan, which could increase further if rambutan were irradiated and its shelf life extended. He estimates a market opportunity of up to 2,000 tons a year each to Japan, the U.S., England and the European continent.²⁸

With Daysh's industry and government interests in mind, it should be no surprise that SureBeam's irradiation application to the Australia New Zealand Food Authority includes rambutan, lychee and longon, in addition to other tropical fruits such as mango and papaya.²⁹

Straddling the Line

Christine Bruhn

Though she's a professor at a public university, Christine Bruhn has developed an intimate relationship with the food industry spanning many years.

Bruhn, who runs the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California-Davis, is one of the most well-known proponents of food irradiation in the U.S., if not the world. She has been quoted in dozens of articles and press releases, spoken at numerous food industry

conferences, and written many articles about advertising and marketing strategies designed to persuade people to buy irradiated food.

Bruhn has worked with the California Cattlemen's Association, California Egg Commission and the American Meat Industry Foundation. She has also consulted for the International Atomic Energy Agency, the No. 1 proponent of food irradiation in the world.³⁰

Currently, Bruhn is heading up a nine-state, \$600,000, USDA-funded "consumer education" campaign designed to increase consumer acceptance and, ultimately, the sales of irradiated food.

This "education" campaign, which is enlisting public university professors and state health officials, contains all the elements one would expect to find in an advertising and marketing campaign: selecting the product, testing the product on potential markets and gauging the responses, gauging the responses to informational material, monitoring sales, and adjusting advertising and sales strategies based on consumer responses.³¹

James Dickson

James Dickson's appointment as president of the International Association for Food Protection (IAFP) is the latest academic cap to an industry organization that actively promotes strong ties between industry, government and academia.

A microbiology professor at Iowa State University, Dickson is a member of the Institute for Food Technologists, an organization that actively lobbies the government in support of food irradiation.³² Dickson's research focuses on the relationship between food processing and storage practices and potentially harmful bacteria – an issue that the food irradiation industry has seized upon to justify the use of ionizing radiation to "treat" bacteria-contaminated food.

Dickson's appointment rounds out an executive board loaded with figures from industry, government and academia, including members from Health Canada, Kraft Foods, the University of Wisconsin, the National Food Processors Association and Darden Restaurants Inc.³³

IAFP is a close-knit family. In 1986, Christine Bruhn (see above) was the first prize recipient of a new honor, the Developing Scientists Award.³⁴ She now serves on IAFP's Dairy, Food and Environment Sanitation Management Committee and is slated to be vice chair in 2003,³⁵ a position that she can use to push irradiation as a silver bullet for sanitation. Similarly, IAFP's Food Sanitation Professional

Development Group includes Myung-Woo Byung, the Korean delegate to ICGFI, whose day job is at the Food Irradiation Department of the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Other ties between IAFP and food irradiation include – among many such connections – funding from pro-irradiation companies Kraft and IBP, a food irradiation "education" video made available to members, and academic articles on food irradiation in its *Journal of Food Protection*.³⁶ IAFP will surely benefit from the academic credentials Dickson brings to the organization in its quest to capitalize on the public's fear of food hazards.

Elsa Murano

When President George W. Bush nominated Elsa Murano to become Under Secretary of Food Safety of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in July 2001, the food irradiation industry could not have hoped for a better selection.

Murano, who runs the Center for Food Safety at Texas A&M University, began her career working with Dennis Olson (see above) at the food irradiation center at Iowa State. She has been busily promoting food irradiation ever since, issuing public statements, and making presentations at university, industry and government conferences.

During an April 2001 presentation to the USDA, Murano stated – in the face of vast scientific evidence to the contrary – that more than 1,000 research studies have revealed "no significant difference between irradiated and non-irradiated foods in terms of: toxigenicity, pathogenicity, or mutagenicity."³⁷

In a May 2000 Texas A&M press release, Murano compared food irradiation with microwaving,³⁸ a bogus analogy that the industry has since embraced to mislead consumers.

One month later, San Diego-based SureBeam Corp., a major food irradiation company affiliated with defense contractor Titan Corp., supplied Texas A&M with millions of dollars worth of irradiation equipment. University employees – working for free or at reduced rates – are now irradiating food that SureBeam is turning around and selling for a profit. In the first six months of 2001 alone, the deal was worth \$2 million to SureBeam.³⁹

Michael Osterholm

It would be difficult to find a more energetic cheerleader of food irradiation than Michael Osterholm.

In his role as Minnesota state epidemiologist, Osterholm was frequently quoted in the media talking up the benefits of irradiation – sometimes

taking liberties with the facts about the process. "This is not any different from what heating does," Osterholm told *USA Today* after irradiated ground beef made its grocery store debut in Minnesota in May 2000.⁴⁰

Osterholm attended the celebration that the company, Huisken Meats, held in Minnesota. "Today is an incredibly historic event," he said.⁴¹ "There will never be another hamburger eaten in our house that is not irradiated."⁴²

Osterholm has also spoken at irradiation

industry conferences, including a 1998 meeting organized by the Grocery Manufacturers Association and Food Marketing Institute, which also featured a speech by the president/CEO of ConAgra, Bruce Rhode.⁴³

And, Osterholm has testified before Congress about irradiation. "There is one major step we, as a society, can take toward producing safer food," he told the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee in 1997. "The answer is irradiation."⁴⁴

Notes

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- ²⁰ "Edward Samuel Josephson." *American Men and Women of Science*. February 1998.
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