



For immediate release:
July 10, 2003

Contact:
Andrianna Natsoulas, Public Citizen, (202) 454-5188
Andrea Peart, Sierra Club of Canada, (613) 241-4611

Decision to Weaken Food Irradiation Rules Condemned by Consumer Groups

*Foods Now Permitted to Be Irradiated at Any Dose;
Presence of Chemicals Linked to Cancer and Birth Defects Ignored*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Leading consumer groups in the United States, Canada and Italy today condemned the weakening of international food irradiation rules, which will allow any food to be irradiated at any dose, regardless of how high. The decision ignores well-documented evidence that irradiated foods may not be safe for human consumption – including the destruction of vitamins and the formation of chemicals linked to cancer and birth defects.

The decision was made in Rome on Monday by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which sets food safety standards for 168 nations, and which operates under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO). The decision was made over the objections of more than 10 countries, including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Mexico and Spain.

“The UN and WHO have abandoned their mission to protect the health and welfare of the world’s population,” said Andrianna Natsoulas of Public Citizen’s Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program. “People who eat irradiated foods will become guinea pigs in what will amount to one of the largest feeding experiments in history.”

“This is the final straw in the reckless pursuit of using irradiation, which is still an experimental technology, to solve complicated food safety problems,” said Andrea Peart of the Sierra Club of Canada. “This decision is a severe blow against the rights of nations to establish their own food safety laws. It is undemocratic on its face.”

Among the toxic chemicals formed in irradiated foods are 2-alkylcyclobutanones (2-ACBs), which recently were found to promote cancer development and cause genetic damage in rats, and cause genetic damage to human cells. Other toxic chemicals that have been detected in irradiated

foods include several compounds that are known or suspected to cause cancer or birth defects, including benzene, ethanol, toluene and methyl ethyl ketone.

Monday's decision by Codex removed the maximum radiation dose to which foods can be "treated," which had been in place since 1979. The previous limit was 10 kiloGray, a dose of radiation equivalent to 330 million chest X-rays. At such doses, the chemical composition of foods can be altered; vitamins, proteins and other nutrients can be destroyed; and flavor, odor and texture can be corrupted.

Giulio Labbro Francia of the Italian Consumer's group, Movimento Dei Consumatori, responded to the decision by saying, "We are at a loss to explain Codex's contention that irradiated foods are safe to eat in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. Now consumers throughout the world are in danger of the unknown health impacts."

In a minor concession to consumer organizations, which fought against the removal of the limit, countries would have to demonstrate that irradiating food above 10 kiloGray meets a "legitimate technological purpose." Because this requirement was not defined further, however, countries are essentially free to irradiate foods at any dose.

Codex standards are enforceable through the World Trade Organization, meaning that member nations that have food irradiation laws stricter than the new Codex standard could have their laws challenged and overruled. Currently, only Brazil has a food irradiation law in keeping with the new Codex standard, meaning that laws in every other nation – including all 15 European Union countries – are now in jeopardy.

Codex also elected a new chairperson this week, Dr. Stuart Slorach of Sweden's National Food Administration. Dr. Slorach is seen as being more attentive to consumer needs than his predecessor, Thomas Billy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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