



Philippines: The Next Target for Irradiation

Irradiation is the “treatment” of food with enormous doses of ionizing radiation, in the form of gamma rays from radioactive cobalt-60, cesium-137, electron beams and X-rays. It delays ripening of fruit, inhibits the sprouting of vegetables, and kills bacteria and insects that infest foods, but it destroys vitamins and creates potentially hazardous new chemical compounds in the process. Irradiation also allows food to withstand long distance shipments without spoilage.

Food Irradiation is yet another avenue to globalization and harmonization. There is growing international pressure from the irradiation and agri-business industries to increase the use of irradiation on food, but irradiation has many potential dangers for consumers, workers, the environment, farmers and fishermen. As more consuming nations accept food irradiation, multinational food corporations will grow food in the global South – where labor rights and environmental regulations are weak. And the Philippines is the irradiation industry’s next target.

United States Forcing Nations to Embrace Hazardous Technology

Recently, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) decided that irradiation could be used in place of chemical, heat or cold treatments to kill pests. For the first time in history, irradiated produce is now allowed and actually encouraged for exportation to the U.S. The rule will benefit large food producers, processors and exporters at the expense of small farmers.

Farmers in the Philippines will not be able to compete with cheap exports, so their land and labor will become susceptible to joint ventures that grow cash crops for consuming nations. Cash crops will be irradiated and shipped at low cost to the industrialized world. As a result, a blind eye will be turned to agricultural diversity, and hence ecological sustainability, as well as small-scale family farmers.

Coming Soon to the Philippines

SureBeam, an American irradiation company, has been very active recently the Philippines. SureBeam is negotiating with two local agri-businesses to build an irradiation facility that will cost at least US\$5 million, possibly near Manila. SureBeam is also negotiating with the Mayor of Cebu, Tomas Osmena. Visayas Chamber of Mango Industry Multi-purpose Cooperative. is lobbying the Filipino government for a feasibility study on the installation of an irradiation facility in Cebu, which would cost US\$6-7 million. Even the Filipino Bureau of Plant and Industry supports the construction of these facilities to irradiate mangoes, papayas, bananas and pineapples.¹

The island of Guimaras endured a quarantine of almost 15 years before the U.S. was satisfied that its mangoes were free from seed weevils and fruit flies. Guimaras is the only island of the Philippines from which the U.S. will accept imported mangoes. Yet, Guimaras produces only a small amount of mangoes each year, so fruit exporters cannot assure a steady year-round supply and must deal with higher shipment costs. Because irradiation extends shelf life, tropical fruit can be shipped to consuming countries; thus, decreasing the transport costs.

International Trade

As the World Trade Organization attempts to include all aspects of agriculture within its reach, countries will become more and more at the mercy of the powerful four quad nations – the United States, Japan, European Union and Canada. Developing countries will be pitted against each other in their attempts to be among the big four's favorites. This is already evident in the comparison of mango exports of Mexico and the Philippines. The Philippines is second in mango production to Mexico, which accounts for 41 percent of the U.S. mango imports. The Philippines generates up to \$35 million a year from the export of mangoes.²

This export competition and animosity will grow until producing countries are divided and isolated from one another. Forcing dangerous technologies, such as food irradiation, is only the start. By threatening to shut trade doors if food irradiation is not implemented, those nations will also be forced to allow foreign, multi-billion-dollar companies, such as SureBeam, in for a profit.

Technologies such as food irradiation encourage the consolidation of agriculture. Food irradiation is simply another tool for large agri-businesses. As exports increase, non-Filipino companies, such as Del Monte and Dole, will procure agricultural land. With that, farmers will struggle, be forced to sell their land and move to urban areas. This has already happened in numerous other countries with serious ramifications, such as increased urban poverty, unemployment and crime. Other farmers will become tenant farmers on their own land. Is this really the best thing for the Philippines and the Filipino people?

Irradiated Food Not Good for Your Health

Irradiation forms new chemicals in food that are known or suspected to cause cancer and birth defects; destroys vitamins and other essential nutrients; and corrupts the flavor, odor and texture of food. A wide range of health problems have been observed in animals fed irradiated foods, including premature death, stillbirths, mutations, fatal internal bleeding, organ damage, immune system dysfunction, stunted growth and nutritional

deficiencies. Recent research conducted in the European Union calls for further research into the wholesomeness of food before it is blindly accepted. The research found links between irradiated foods and the development of tumors.

Serious Accidents Throughout the World

Since the 1960s, dozens of accidents – as well as numerous acts of wrongdoing – have been reported at irradiation facilities throughout the world. Radioactive water has been flushed down the toilets into the public sewer system. Radioactive waste has been thrown into garbage. Radiation has leaked. Facilities have caught fire. Equipment has malfunctioned. Workers have lost fingers, hands, legs and their lives. Company executives have been charged with cover-ups and, in one case, sentenced to federal prison.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency recognizes that all ionizing radiation, including cobalt-60 and cesium-137, is known to cause cancer. Exposures to gamma radiation from cobalt-60 and cesium-137 can result in an increased risk of cancer. External exposure is usually considered a greater threat, because stronger gamma rays are emitted. The magnitude of the health risk depends on the quantity of the radioactive isotope involved, length of exposure, distance from the source (for external exposure) and whether the cobalt-60 was ingested or inhaled.

Notes

¹ Gallardo, Leilani M. "U.S. approval of irradiation expected to boost RP fruit, vegetable exports." *BusinessWorld* (Philippines), November 29, 2002.

² Estabillo, Allen V. "WEEKENDER - AGRIBUSINESS RP mangoes have clients in US Pinoys." *BusinessWorld* (Philippines), December 13, 2002.



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