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EC Blocks Plan to Weaken Global Food Irradiation Standards

Proposal to Allow Ultra-High-Dose 'Treatment' of Food Defeated; Chemicals Associated with Cancer and Genetic Damage Cited

Brussels: An international proposal that would have allowed all foods to be “treated” with ionising radiation at any dose level has been abandoned, following opposition by the European Commission and a coalition of consumer organisations. The plan has been dropped largely due to concerns over toxic chemicals formed in many irradiated foods that recent research has linked with cancer and genetic damage.

The proposal to remove the maximum radiation dose to which food could be exposed was floated by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, a United Nations affiliate that sets international food safety standards for more than 160 nations. The plan was strongly supported by the United States, Canada, Australia and numerous Asian, South American and Middle Eastern countries that support food irradiation as a means to extend shelf life and, thus, expand international trade – particularly in seafood, meat and crops from developing nations.

European Union Member States oppose the Codex proposal mainly because irradiation of many foods results in the formation of cyclobutanones – unique chemical compounds that have never been found to occur naturally in any food. Recent research – some of which was EC-funded – found that cyclobutanones promoted the cancer-forming process in rats and caused genetic damage in rats and in human cells. These chemicals are formed in irradiated foods that contain fat, such as meat, eggs and nuts.

Merav Shub of the Food Commission in London commented: ‘It is encouraging to see that in this case the precautionary principle is being heeded. Until the long-term effects on human health of eating irradiated foods have been studied in full, a relaxation of the international laws governing food irradiation would be premature.’ The Association of European Consumers, with member organisations from 34 European countries, also opposes any relaxation of the international food irradiation standards.

Currently, the European Union only permits the irradiation of dried aromatic herbs, spices and vegetable seasonings. The European Parliament (EP) is now considering a proposal to allow irradiation of several categories of food, including peeled shrimp, frog legs, dried fruit, cereal flakes, egg whites and chicken offal. The EP is scheduled to vote on this proposal on 17 December. Meanwhile, the United States already permits irradiation for most major food classes, including beef, pork, poultry, fruits, vegetables, eggs and spices. Many U.S. trading partners also have irradiation laws that are more permissive than those of the EU and EU member states.

Consumer, farmer and environmental groups are concerned that in addition to potential risks to health from the chemicals produced in food that has been irradiated, irradiated foods have lower nutritional content. Consumers can also be misled if sprouting or ripening have been delayed by irradiation, because this makes food look fresh even if it is weeks old. European farmers will be forced to compete with inexpensive imported produce, as large agribusinesses move into developing countries where labour protection laws are weak and environmental protection is practically non-existent. Workers at irradiation plants are at risk from accidental exposure to radiation, as are human populations and the environment from accidental radioactive spills and leaks.

A recent report by the U.S. consumer advocacy group Public Citizen found that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has endorsed food irradiation despite substantial evidence that laboratory animals fed irradiated foods have suffered premature death, mutations and other genetic abnormalities, fetal death and other reproductive problems, immune system disorders, fatal internal bleeding, organ damage, tumors, stunted growth and nutritional deficiencies. The WHO insists, however, that irradiated foods are safe for human consumption.

‘The World Health Organisation has ignored over 40 years of research indicating serious health hazards associated with eating irradiated food. The United States has also endorsed it, while ignoring their own research conducted on young soldiers in the 1960’s,’ said Wenonah Hauter, director of Public Citizen’s Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program. ‘The European Union now has the opportunity to be the global leader in protecting consumers from the grave dangers of eating irradiated food.’

The Codex Commission has also insisted that irradiated foods are safe for human consumption. The proposal to remove the radiation dose cap was dropped late last month after a compromise was reached by a subcommittee of the Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants. The Committee is expected to approve the compromise at its next meeting 17-21 March in Tanzania, and send its approval to the full Codex Commission for possible consideration at the Commission’s next meeting in July.

For More Information, visit www.citizen.org/cmep/foodsafety and www.foodcommission.org

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