



Why Vegetarians and Vegans Should Worry About Food Irradiation

Vegetarians and vegans may wonder, “Why should I care about food irradiation if it’s mainly being done to meat?” The answer is: The issue is not nearly as simple as it may seem.

Irradiation directly and indirectly affects the lives of people who refrain from consuming animal products in many ways, regardless of why they choose to do so. The problems associated with irradiation extend far beyond the immediate concerns about what this process does to food.

From perpetuating factory farming and globalization, to threatening environmental sustainability and social justice, food irradiation is an emerging danger that should be on the radar screen of everyone concerned not only about how food is grown and processed, but about environmental, economic and social conditions as well.

Health: The Ugly Truth About Irradiation

The dose of ionizing radiation used to “treat” food is incomprehensibly high — the equivalent of up to 1 *billion* chest x-rays. While irradiation may kill harmful microorganisms and extend the shelf-life of food, the process has numerous negative side-effects that have been dismissed and ignored by the food industry and the federal government alike.

Irradiation results in the formation of benzene, methyl ethyl ketone and other chemicals known or suspected to cause cancer and birth defects. Irradiation also creates toxic chemicals called cyclobutanones, which do not occur naturally in any food on Earth, and which recently were

linked to cancer development.

Irradiation also destroys vitamins and essential fatty acids, and breaks down proteins and carbohydrates. And, perhaps most alarming, the long-term effects of eating irradiated food have never been assessed.

Globalization: Fruit and Vegetables Are Next in the Cross-Hairs

In the spring of 2000, the U.S. Department of Agriculture proposed legalizing irradiation for imported fruit and vegetables, ostensibly to prevent the further invasion of non-native fruit flies and other insects.

Just as the overall goals of irradiation may seem beneficial on the surface, there is far more to the story of irradiating imported

produce than meets the eye.

As it is, fully one-third of our fruit and vegetables are imported — mainly because labor is cheaper and environmental laws are more lax in developing nations. The catastrophic effects on the U.S. agriculture industry — particularly on family farmers and farming communities — have been well documented.

Multinational corporations such as Philip Morris/Kraft and Green Giant want to move even more food production outside of the U.S. This would further compromise the safety and wholesomeness of our food and encourage more corporate control over food production and distribution, making a safe, sustainable and secure food supply an unlikely future.

With irradiation as another tool at their disposal, multinational corporations are redoubling their efforts to convert indigenous farming communities in developing nations into cash croplands, and boost exports to North America, Europe and Japan. Brazil, for instance, is being groomed to become “the fruit-basket of the world.”

Animal Rights and Factory Farming: Perpetuating the Problem

The meat industry maximizes profits by raising animals in cramped, inhumane conditions and then “processing” them in filthy plants that are breeding grounds for *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and other potentially deadly food-borne pathogens. With up to 90 chickens being slaughtered per minute, and 300 cows being slaughtered per hour, maintaining humane practices is virtually impossible.

Food irradiation would only exacerbate these problems. Pressures on food companies to clean contaminated facilities and slow down line-speeds to make slaughtering more humane would be eased. And, by making irradiation a regulatory standard, companies could protect themselves from liability.

Environment and Sustainability: More Radiation

Many people choose a vegetarian or vegan diet because meat production causes massive environmental damage. Among the major problems are excess nitrogen, phosphorus and ammonia in the soil and water caused by animal excrement; erosion and soil infertility caused by grazing; and the overdependence on water, grain, petroleum, pesticides and drugs to breed animals for food. Irradiation would perpetuate these problems by allowing the meat industry to maintain the status quo.

Additionally, irradiation facilities that use gamma radiation encourage the production of deadly cobalt-60, and result in yet more radioactive waste. Irradiation is another polluting industry that hides behind the guise of public health.

The Big Picture

Food and nuclear industry executives, along with federal government officials, are simultaneously trying to encourage the public acceptance and ignorance of irradiation. This campaign knows no boundaries. Regardless of what one chooses to eat or not to eat, misinformation — especially as it relates to an issue as universal as our food supply — should not go unanswered.

Because of their political and economic sensibilities, vegetarians and vegans have an even greater burden than the general population to engage a system that is bent on making food irradiation — a vestige of Cold War nuclear hysteria — a social norm. Any effort to reform an industry gone haywire must include an effort to ban the use of ionizing radiation to “treat” food. The clock is ticking. By the time the health, environmental and economic effects manifest, it very well may be too late.



For more information,
contact us at:
(202) 546-4996
cmep@citizen.org
www.citizen.org/cmep