

Food Irradiation



Alert!



An Inside Report on Food Safety and the Food Industry ♦ October / November 2001 ♦ Vol. 2, No. 5

No Recount in Florida: Stores Unanimously Drop Irradiated Meat

Citing poor sales and low consumer interest, six grocery stores and meat markets in Florida that began selling irradiated ground beef last year have pulled the products from their shelves. And, major retailers Wal-Mart and Publix have backed out of deals to sell a Florida meat packer's irradiated ground beef.

Coupled with July's announcement that an 80-store chain in Wisconsin has dropped irradiated beef, these failures represent the most significant test-market flops in the food irradiation industry's 40-year history.

In Florida, all six independently owned stores that started selling irradiated hamburger patties last year no longer sell the products, store owners or employees told Public Citizen. The stores are located in Fort Lauderdale, Lakeland, North Miami Beach, Plant City, Stuart and Winter Haven.

Owners said they simply weren't selling enough of the products. "We experimented with it for a short time, but there was not enough consumer demand or interest," said Roy DeLoach, owner of DeLoach's Meat Mart in Lakeland. "For us to carry an item, we actually have to *sell* the stuff – but it didn't sell. It was almost as though people didn't care." David Lorenzo, owner of Lorenzo's Italian Specialty Food Market in North Miami Beach, said, "We've tried selling it two or three times. The last time we tried it, the guys who work on the front line of our store said, 'Not again.' "

Supplying the stores was Colorado Boxed Beef of Auburndale, Fla., which made national news in June 2000 when it began distributing its "New Generation" line of irradiated hamburger patties. The company had announced that two major chains had made commit-

ments to sell the products, but those two companies, Wal-Mart and Publix, have since backed out.

Florida's test-market was a disaster despite high-profile efforts by several government agencies to persuade people to buy the products. Most notably, Deputy State Health Officer Richard Hunter went so far as to write a letter to Floridians urging them to buy irradiated food. Fittingly, Hunter jumped to the private

sector in September when he became president and CEO of Food Technology Service, an irradiation company based in Mulberry, Fla.

In Wisconsin, Pick 'n Save has dropped irradiated ground beef from its 80 stores there because, accord-

ing to a spokesperson, "there has been absolutely no consumer acceptance." A Milwaukee newspaper reported in July that "interest in the so-called 'safer' meat is virtually non-existent," just one year after an *E. coli* outbreak in Milwaukee killed a 3-year-old girl and sickened dozens of other people.

Irradiated beef is still being test-marketed in California, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. Except for Minnesota's Twin Cities, sales are predominantly occurring in rural areas.

Anyone concerned about irradiated food sales is encouraged to discuss the issue with their local store managers.

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'It didn't sell. It was almost as though people didn't care.'

— Roy DeLoach, owner, DeLoach's Meat Mart, Lakeland, Fla.

Truth Squad**Irradiation Propagandists Get Message of Their Own**

As reported in our April/May issue, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is putting \$600,000 in public funds toward a nine-state "consumer education" campaign intended to improve the image and boost sales of irradiated food. The campaign is not being led by a nutritionist or a doctor, but by an advertising professor at the University of California-Davis named Christine Bruhn. For many years, Bruhn has been academia's most active proponent of food irradiation.

In response, Public Citizen has organized a counter-campaign with the goal of stopping this dubious use of taxpayer money. We have conducted targeted mailings to the public university professors, state health officials, and professional health and environmental associations that Bruhn is hoping to enlist to persuade Americans to buy food that has been "treated" with high doses of ionizing radiation.

We are also encouraging people in the nine states to write to university deans and health department directors urging them not to participate in the project. The nine states are Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Texas.

Surprisingly, Bruhn has made no secret of her goal. "Objective 1" of her campaign is "increasing consumer knowledge and acceptance of foods processed by irradiation."



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Founded in 1971, Public Citizen advocates for consumer protection, and for government and corporate accountability.

Objective 1 of our counter-campaign is to deter professors, government officials and health professionals from being forged into tools for the food irradiation industry, which, seemingly, will stop at little to blur or outright hide the truth about their wares.

To participate in the counter-campaign, call us at (202) 546-4996 or send an e-mail to cmep@citizen.org.

Corporate Campaign**Rad-Food Companies Get News that Gives Them Fits**

For several months now, Public Citizen has been making sure that the executives and stockholders of companies involved with food irradiation – the people who have the most to lose financially – know exactly what they're getting themselves into.

Through coordinated mailings, the most prominent U.S. food irradiation companies and their investors are being updated with the most current information on their industry – information that their public relations offices are most likely unaware of. They're being told...

- ◆ that more than 80 grocery stores and meat markets in Florida and Wisconsin have pulled irradiated meat off of their shelves, due to poor sales.
- ◆ that 98.2 percent of people who responded to a recent FDA survey said they want federal labeling laws for irradiated food maintained or strengthened.
- ◆ that Public Citizen has formally objected to numerous FDA food irradiation approvals, primarily due to the presence of unique chemicals in irradiated food that recently were shown to cause genetic and/or cellular damage in rats and human cells.
- ◆ that Public Citizen has filed false advertising complaints against numerous companies that irradiate food or sell irradiated products.
- ◆ that certain irradiated foods contain chemicals known or suspected to cause cancer and birth defects, such as benzene, toluene and methyl ethyl ketone, which are also ingredients of gasoline, aviation fuel, industrial solvents, plastics, pesticides and explosives.

Receiving these mailings are companies with publicly traded stock: Food Technology Service of Mulberry, Fla.; STERIS/Isomedix of Mentor, Ohio; and Titan/SureBeam of San Diego. The mailings are personally addressed to company CEOs, and managers of mutual funds and investment firms that own stock in the companies.

It is unlikely a coincidence that the newest of these companies, SureBeam, has seen its stock price fall by more than 50 percent since May. In late September, SureBeam's stock price fell below \$7 per share, far below the \$10 level at the which the company initially sold stock when it went public in March.

We will continue this effort to educate companies and investors that food irradiation is a losing venture.

Truth Squad**FTC Urged to Investigate
'Pasteurization' Ads**

Public Citizen and the Center for Food Safety have called on the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to initiate a thorough investigation into companies that advertise food irradiation as "pasteurization" and irradiated food products as "pasteurized."

Five of the eight U.S.-based food irradiation companies that maintain websites predominantly use the misleading euphemisms "cold pasteurization" or "electronic pasteurization" to describe the process by which food is exposed to high doses of ionizing radiation.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has said that calling irradiated food products "pasteurized" is "misleading." Deceptive advertising is illegal under federal law and punishable through criminal and civil penalties.

The five food irradiation companies named in the groups' letter to the FTC are:

- ♦ Agbeta of Carpinteria, Calif.;
- ♦ BioSterile Technology of Fort Wayne, Ind.;
- ♦ Oasis-Santa Barbara of Santa Barbara, Calif.;
- ♦ Scanmex of Laredo, Texas; and
- ♦ Titan/SureBeam of San Diego.

The most prominent of these companies are defense contractor Titan and its affiliate, SureBeam, which uses linear accelerators originally designed for the "Star Wars" program to irradiate food. Public Citizen has also filed complaints against two of SureBeam's clients, Omaha Steaks and Huisken Meats. Those two companies have since corrected their websites to say that their ground beef products have been "irradiated."

SureBeam, however, has significantly expanded its use of the word "pasteurized" in promotional material, using it repeatedly in advertisements appearing in major newspapers and on television, radio stations and the Internet. In half-page newspaper ads that ran this past summer in the Twin Cities, for example, SureBeam said its technique, which uses speed-of-light electrons, "is much like milk pasteurization," which uses heat.

The groups also named Hawaii Pride of Keaau, Hawaii, which "treats" papayas and other tropical fruit destined for the mainland with a Titan/SureBeam X-ray machine. Like the SureBeam ad, Hawaii Pride's website compares its products to "heat pasteurized milk."

At the Grassroots**Minnesotans Fight Ozone-
Spewing Irradiation Plant**

A coalition of environmental and family farming groups in Minnesota has called on state officials to conduct a formal environmental review before allowing a food irradiation plant to open in the rural community of Sauk Rapids, near St. Cloud.

Minnesota Safe Food Link is concerned that the plant will release potentially dangerous amounts of ozone. The 45,000-square-foot facility, which will house a high-energy linear accelerator, is located near two schools and a park.

When inhaled – even by healthy people at very low levels – ozone can cause permanent lung damage, aggravate asthma and heart disease, reduce lung capacity and impair the body's immune system, making people more susceptible to bronchitis and pneumonia. Children are most at risk because their respiratory systems are still developing. Outdoor workers and the elderly are also particularly vulnerable.

Additionally, ozone can cause a wide range of environmental problems, such as making plants more susceptible to disease and pests, interfering with plants' ability to produce and store food, and, over time, harming entire forests and ecosystems. Ozone is also responsible for destroying a half-billion dollars worth of crops per year, including wheat, soybeans and cotton.

The proposed facility is owned by Huisken Meats, which already sells ground beef that has been irradiated in Sioux City, Iowa by SureBeam Corp. An affiliate of San Diego-based defense contractor Titan Corp., SureBeam "treats" food with speed-of-light electrons fired from linear accelerators originally designed for the "Star Wars" program. Huisken plans to install one of SureBeam's machines in its Sauk Rapids facility.

Minnesota Safe Food Link is comprised of Clean Water Action, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minnesota COACT, Minnesota Food Association, Organic Consumers Association and Public Citizen.

Plug in to Public Citizen!

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Action Opportunity

**Tell the FDA:
No More False Moves**

The Food and Drug Administration has reached a moment of truth...

The agency can either proceed with all pending food irradiation decisions without following federal regulations, or the agency can refrain from legalizing the irradiation of any additional types of food until the health effects of these products are fully analyzed.

From the outside, the decision looks like a no-brainer. Why, after all, would the FDA knowingly ignore federal regulations that mandate the steps the agency must take before legalizing a food additive for human consumption?

We don't know why the FDA ignored these rules in the past – when the agency legalized the irradiation of fruit, vegetables, beef, lamb, poultry, pork, eggs, juice and sprouting seeds. We do know that these decisions were flawed, and that the agency has not conducted enough research to justify legalizing irradiation for ready-to-eat foods and shellfish.

We hold out hope that FDA officials, deep down, want to do the right thing for the American people. What they need to know is that the American people want them to do the right thing. The only way they can know that is if you tell them.

Tell the FDA Commissioner and his boss, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, to be truthful. Two letters. Two stamps. Sixty-eight cents.

Sample Letter

Secretary Tommy Thompson
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dr. Bernard Schwetz
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
Office of the Commissioner
14-71 Parklawn Building
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear _____:

I am writing to you because I oppose any further food irradiation approvals – particularly for ready-to-eat foods and shellfish – until a comprehensive testing program on the health effects of irradiated food is conducted.

Past experiments have revealed a wide range of health problems in animals that ate irradiated food, including premature death, a rare form of cancer, genetic damage, stillbirths and other reproductive problems, fatal internal bleeding, organ damage and nutritional deficiencies.

And, a unique chemical formed in irradiated food called 2-DCB was recently found to cause genetic and/or cellular damage in rats and human cells.

There are simply too many unanswered questions about the safety and wholesomeness of irradiated products to justify allowing any additional types of food to be irradiated. Please do the right thing and ensure that these products are safe to eat before allowing them to reach the market.

Sincerely,

Your Name & Address

Public Citizen

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