



Come On Baby

Flirting with Food Irradiation

*Health Canada has taken a brand new stance now
Now that they've approved irradiation
I know you'll get to like it if you give it a chance now
Come on baby, food irradiation
It's a simple process, you can do it with ease
It's sure to put a damper on foodborne disease
So come on, come on, do irradiation with me
(Lyrics adapted by Dr. Carl Winter
To the tune of "Locomotion")*

Sal Monella & The Pathogens is the house band of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Playing at United Way fundraisers and other benefits, part of our act is to play rock and roll songs of the '60s with food safety lyrics. Canadians of a certain age readily recognize the catchy Little Eva tune, but the food industry will quickly spot the error in the lyrics because the proposed amendments are not yet approved. In fact, Health Canada officials have recently confirmed that the regulations won't be in effect until the summer of 2004 at the earliest.

In November 2002, Health Canada announced its intention to amend the Table to Division 25 of the Food and Drug Regulations to allow additional irradiated foods to be sold in Canada. They are fresh, frozen, prepared and dried shrimp and prawns, fresh and frozen poultry, and fresh and frozen ground beef to control pathogens, reduce microbial load and extend durable life; and to mangoes, to control insect infestation during storage and to extend durable life. So far in Canada, the main use of irradiation has been on spices.

The process would not be mandatory but all pre-packaged food products must be labeled as irradiated and display the international symbol identifying irradiated foods, the radura, on the principal display panel of the label.

Before publishing the proposed regulations, Health Canada carried out a thorough technical review and concluded that the irradiated foods were safe. The World Health Organization endorsed food irradiation more than 20 years ago. The United States approved irradiation of poultry in 1990 and red meat in 1997. Large retail chains like Wegmans and Publix Super Markets report strong consumer acceptance. Surebeam, a leading manufacturer of irradiation processing systems is eager to extend its technology and has

already opened an office in Canada in anticipation of the new regulations.

Food safety expert Dr. Douglas Powell of the University of Guelph has been critical of Health Canada's foot dragging, calling the continued delay in approving irradiation "an embarrassing regulatory glitch." He asks: "how could an agency charged with the oversight of the safety of the food supply not approve irradiation, in essence blocking access to a tool that can reduce the impact of food borne illness on the Canadian public?"

To be fair to Health Canada, there are at least three reasons for the delays. First, there has not been a clear consensus among Canadians. A recent poll found that 54% of Canadians said that they would not buy food treated with irradiation because of the safety concerns, while 43% said that they would buy such food because it would make it safer from harmful bacteria and slow down spoilage.

Second, Health Canada officials can't help it if they are handcuffed with what has been called the most rigid, time-consuming regulatory system in the western world. Combine this with chronic staff shortages and you have a system in which even non-controversial regulatory changes usually take over two years.

Third, irradiation is another one of those issues that raises the thorny question of regulatory harmonization with the United States. These are always politically problematic because often the regulator is caught between the Canadian companies with a vested interest in the status quo and those companies that would prefer the 49th parallel to wither away. But enough of this heavy legal and policy stuff. Here's how the song ends. And, by the way, we are available for winter gigs in sunny climes.

*There's never been a process that so easy to try
A little bit of cobalt and the microbes die
So come on come on, do irradiation with me.*

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