

Irradiation step doesn't quiet debate on FDA moves

Agency's approval of irradiation of some vegetables is the latest to cause disagreement



By Stephen J Hedges
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WASHINGTON — After two years of nearly constant food-borne illness outbreaks and recalls of everything from tainted peanut butter to tons of hamburger meat, the Food and Drug Administration's decision last week to allow the irradiation of lettuce and spinach to kill dangerous bacteria didn't surprise anyone in the food industry.

Nor did it solve a long-simmering debate over whether the agency's penchant for prescribing such technical fixes to biological problems makes sense. There are strong feelings on both sides of the argument, and the lettuce/spinach decision brought them once again to the surface.

Zapping spinach and iceberg lettuce with a tiny shot of radiation is an effective way to prevent deadly outbreaks of *E. coli*, according to the FDA, which says it's safe. But not everyone agrees.

"It's the latest in a series of PR moves designed to mislead the public from the fact that the government is asleep at the wheel here," said Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, an organic food watchdog group.

Randy Huffman, president of the American Meat Institute Foundation, which favors irradiation of food, holds a different view.

“Any group that is opposed to a proven, safe technology that enhances food safety is misguided,” Huffman said.

The FDA’s irradiation decision is the latest attempt to find a technical fix to what has become a near-epidemic food safety problem.

- In 2000, the FDA approved the use of irradiation on meat, a practice that has not gained widespread consumer acceptance.
- In July 2004, the agency approved the application of carbon monoxide gas to preserve the red color of packaged meat.
- In January more controversy was stirred when the FDA approved the sale of meat and dairy products from cloned cows.

Whether consumers will accept irradiated lettuce and spinach is an open question. Irradiated meat, for example, is hard to find in most stores.

Meat, however, isn’t the only irradiated food available. Some imported produce is irradiated, as are some spices. And irradiated food has to carry a label explaining that it was treated.

Each FDA decision has broadened the philosophical divide between food manufacturers, which generally favor the expanded use of such technology, and many food safety and organic food groups that oppose it.

“Food irradiation is a pseudo-fix,” said Bill Freese, a science policy analyst with the Center for Food Safety in Washington. “It’s a way to try to come in and clean up problems that are created in the middle of the food production chain. I think it’s clearly a disincentive to clean up the problems at the source.”

Advocates contend that irradiation doesn’t change the flavor of the food. They argue that irradiation adds an important final “kill step” to the food production chain.

“Hopefully there’ll be some manufacturers that will take that step,” said Bill Marler, a Seattle attorney who represents food contamination victims. “Hopefully the public will be less concerned about it. All the evidence suggests that there’s not a risk.”

Opponents argue that irradiation reduces vitamin levels and alters the makeup of foods. They also suggest irradiation will allow food manufacturers to cut corners on other required food safety measures, because irradiation might be perceived as a more effective food safety measure.

The FDA’s latest irradiation decision on lettuce and spinach comes in response to the 2006 outbreak of *E. coli* from spinach grown in California. An FDA investigation found that the likely source of that contamination was the proximity of cattle operations to fields of produce, and the likelihood that cattle feces tainted the local water supply.

E. coli is a bacteria tolerated by cattle and found in their feces. It has been a big problem for the meat industry during the past year, triggering numerous recalls.

In humans, certain strains of *E. coli* can lead to kidney failure and death and are especially hazardous to children and the elderly.

Freese of the Center for Food Safety argues that the FDA's latest move is an attempt by the Bush administration to loosen as many food regulations as possible before leaving office.

"As far as the Bush administration goes, I think we're seeing a whole raft of attempts to push through regulatory changes like this," Freese said, "ones they're afraid they can't get passed under another president."

But Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association said the Bush administration isn't doing anything other administrations haven't tried.

"This is definitely bipartisan," Cummins said. "Every administration since FDR has been pro-agribusiness, and there hasn't been much difference in their policies."