

November 1, 2000

Donna Shalala, Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

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Dear Secretary Shalala:

I'm writing to urge you to discourage large agribusiness' efforts to make food irradiation more common. Although bombarding food with radiation may kill food-borne pathogens and extend the shelf life of items, food irradiation also depletes nutrients in food, kills beneficial microorganisms, creates dangerous compounds, masks filthy slaughterhouse conditions, and marginalizes already struggling family farmers who are unable to afford this scheme.

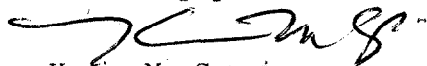
Large agribusiness is pushing for government and public acceptance of food irradiation as a way to extend the shelf life of consumables and kill bacteria that might be infecting those items. The problem of bacterial infection is especially acute for the meat industry, which typically raises food animals in brutal, filthy factory farms and kills them in slaughterhouses where bacteria can proliferate. The nuclear industry has also pushed food irradiation schemes as a way to reuse unwanted nuclear waste. Of course, small family farmers would be unable to use food irradiation, exacerbating the growing income gap between these smaller operations and agricultural giants. If more smaller farmers are forced out of business and competition decreases, food prices would likely rise.

Although the Food and Drug Administration has been sympathetic to the industry's overtures, consumer advocates have not been so enthusiastic, claiming this technology will expose the public to unanticipated dangers. For instance, by breaking apart the chemical bonds in food, irradiation creates a whole new class of compounds--labeled "unique radiolytic products" by the nuclear industry--such as toxic formaldehyde, benzene, and formic acid. Scientists have shown irradiation can produce toxins in certain foods, including carcinogenic aflatoxins in grain and solanine in potatoes. The process also destroys 86% of the vitamin B in oats, 70% of the vitamin C in fruit juices, and depletes essential amino acids and polyunsaturated fatty acids. The radiation also kills beneficial organisms living in food.

A 1997 CBS News poll found that 77% of Americans would not buy irradiated food. Additionally, a 1999 poll commissioned by the American Association of Retired Persons and Center for Science in the Public Interest found that 89% of Americans want labels to indicate food that has been irradiated, suggesting a widespread distrust of food irradiation.

Although agribusiness may claim irradiation will make food safer, there is enough evidence to suggest exposing food to radiation will actually expose the public to many dangers. Please put consumer health first and for now discourage food irradiation. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,


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OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

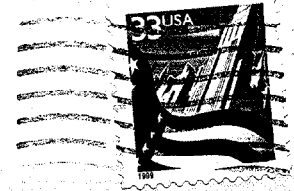
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