

Nuking Food

Contamination fears and market possibilities spur an irradiation revival.

Soon consumers will be able to sample the sweet and tart nectars of many more imported fruits and vegetables from Thailand, India and Mexico piled high in the produce section. But there's a catch. This fruit will arrive irradiated.

Shoppers may not be wiser. FDA rules in place since 1986 have required the radura – a symbol for irradiation that resembles a flower in a broken circle – on place-cards in front of produce displays or on packaged food like ground beef, along with the statement: “treated with radiation” or “treated by irradiation”. But last April, the FDA proposed a revision to those rules. Food which had undergone irradiation, but not “material change”, would no longer have to bear the radura logo and companies could replace the word “irradiation” with the more consumer-friendly “pasteurized” or something else innocuous. Public comments on the current proposed change closed in early July.

Industry insiders argue that irradiation is a necessary answer to food borne illness such as last year's E. coli 0157:H7 outbreak. A commitment to public health is certainly in the best interests of consumer and industry, but a burgeoning worldwide market plays an equally important role in the sudden interest in irradiation.

One of their commercial spices in the US are already subject to irradiation—treatment by gamma rays or electron beams to kill pathogens—as are some 15 to 18 million pounds of ground beef. In 2000, the FDA reported that 97 million pounds of food products were irradiated annually.

The market for more exotic foods is exploding, in part because America is home to such a large number of immigrants and because consumers, influenced by their travels and cultural experiences, are demanding more variety. But traditional bananas and pineapples will cross the borders, too, thanks to irradiation. It's cheaper for American companies to import produce. In Latin America where an increasing amount of the American food supply is grown, “you can use pesticides that are illegal in the US. And there are fewer environmental standards. The food industry's plan is moving to the global south.”

Irradiation would help that plan along immensely, by delaying ripening in fruits like bananas and avocados and inhibiting sprouting in root vegetables, such as onions and potatoes. Irradiation prevents mushroom caps from opening, and even delicate fruits like strawberries benefit from radioactive zapping; because the process “reduces spoilage bacteria and molds... irradiated strawberries can last a week in the refrigerator without developing mold”. Companies could also use cheaper, slower means of transportation to get their perishable items to grocery stores.

And the FDA says there is no reason why irradiated foods shouldn't become the norm. the process is allowed in nearly 40 countries and is endorsed by the World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and the American Medical Association.

Vocal Opposition

Opponents say the meat industry wants to use irradiation as a quick fix to poor sanitation in 200-birds-per-minute slaughterhouse lines and that the technology is being pushed through without proper testing. Wenona Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch, says "it doesn't bode well for the kind of food we want to eat. The truth is, we don't know the long term health effects of a mostly irradiated diet."

The food supply already undergoes a lot of unsettling-sounding processes in the quest for consumer safety, and none of these processes are labeled. "Poison gas is used on fruits and vegetables to kill insect larvae, and organic acid rinses." Michael Jacobsen, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest says, "Irradiation is a high-tech end-of-the-line solution to contamination problems that can and should be addressed earlier. Consumers prefer to have no filth on meat than to have filth sterilized by irradiation."