

## Food irradiation / Your peas may be zapped, but will you know?

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**S**TRAWBERRIES SHOW no fuzzy mold after two weeks in the refrigerator. Potatoes in the cabinet after four months haven't sprouted. No longer do you worry if the bacon has been cooked enough so it won't make you sick.

A kitchen in the year 2000? Not exactly. This is a description of how food storage could change soon if new regulations proposed by the federal Food and Drug Administration on the irradiation of food are implemented.

The regulations, and a bill before Congress co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, would open the door to the irradiation of many more foods than the few now allowed.

Already, as of July 22, the FDA approved irradiation of raw pork. Treating pork with low levels of radiation kills the parasite that causes the often-fatal trichinosis.

A popular misconception is that food irradiation will cause foods to be radioactive. Both proponents and opponents of this method of food preservation agree on at least one point — the allowable doses and energy levels of radiation would not cause leftover radioactivity in food.

But that's about the only point members on which members of the San Francisco-based Coalition Against Food Irradiation agree with irradiation proponents.

Senior citizen Emma Sacco and Brian Sprinsock and Kristine Albrecht, both in their 20s, are members of the local coalition chapter that has been holding meetings and distributing bumper stickers that read, "Say No To Food Irradiation." The coalition can be reached at 427-3445.

**S**ACCO, Sprinsock and Albrecht got involved fighting food irradiation partly because of their interest in the anti-nuclear movement. Anti-nuclear and anti-irradiation go hand in hand because irradiation involves the use of nuclear wastes and the transportation of more of these wastes over the highways.

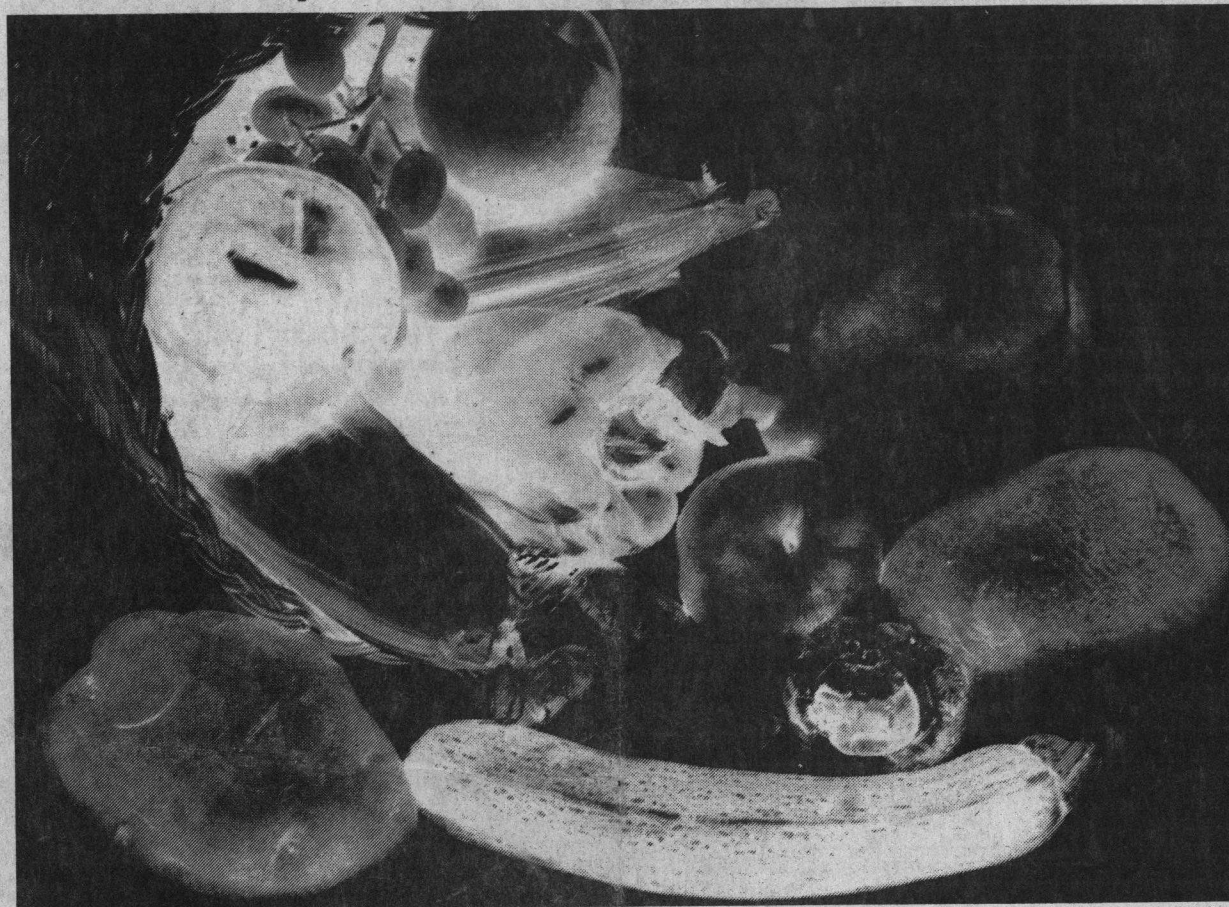
Presently, the radiation source for food irradiation is cobalt 60, used in nuclear power reactors in Canada, said Sprinsock, but the U.S. uses cesium 137 in its reactors.

"The Department of Energy has proposed to convert the high-level, defense-grade wastes from nuclear weapons facilities into cesium 137. It will then undercut the price of cobalt and create this new industry ...," Sprinsock said.

Coalition members believe all the so-called benefits are a smokescreen behind the main reason — profits from nuclear wastes.

"We are not foolish and realize this is tied to issues much greater than ourselves, such as the problem with high level radioactive wastes ... We know we may not be able to stop food irradiation, but if we're really diligent and work hard, we may get it labeled so we have a choice," said Sprinsock.

Those like Sacco, Sprinsock and Albrecht want consumers to say "no" to HR 696, which declares food irradiation "safe and wholesome" and which establishes a commission "for the continued develop-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

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— Congressman Leon Panetta

ment and commercialization of food irradiation."

They also want consumers to say "no" to the proposed regulations, especially because the FDA doesn't think it's necessary for foods to be labeled as being irradiated. Currently, irradiated food must be labeled.

"It's interesting to me on a consumer's right to know level that the FDA is going to take away our right to know," said Sprinsock — artist, waiter, and office manager for the Institute for Policy Studies here.

"We're not even sure that organic food would be safe from food irradiation," added Albrecht, a baker at Staff of Life and an artist with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. Labeling would somewhat ease her concern.

The three don't believe they'll be able to stop the FDA regulations that would expand irradiation beyond the spices, potatoes, raw pork and wheat allowed to be irradiated now. But they believe they can be successful on the labeling issue. And, if irradiated food is labeled, they think there's a good chance consumers won't purchase it.

Panetta also is concerned about labeling. "Or-

ganizations like the American Medical Association who've looked at irradiation have found it to be safe. I'm not jumping up and down for irradiated food, but I do think it should be looked at ... I do think any food that would be irradiated should be labeled. I have written to the FDA to make clear labeling should continue."

He promised that if the FDA continues its stance against labeling, he'll back an amendment to HR 696 to continue labeling.

**W**HY NOT tell shoppers that the can of tomato sauce or the carton of strawberries has been zapped with the allowable one kiloGray of radiation? The American Council on Science and Health, a non-profit consumer education group, took a lot at the available data. It says "yes" to food irradiation and stated in a recently released pamphlet:

"There is no health reason why irradiated foods must be labeled. There is no known population subgroup that needs to avoid these foods, and people do not have to know that a food is irradiated in order to know how to handle it safely. On the other hand,

## consumer clips

comments submitted to the FDA suggest that many people want to know whether foods have been irradiated, and this desire is a strong argument in favor of labeling."

The council cites many studies, including one by the Army, as evidence that have irradiation is safe. Its pamphlet is available by sending a stamped (39 cent postage), business size envelope to Irradiated Foods Report, ACSH, 47 Maple St., Summit, NJ 07901.

Albrecht said she's also tried to get some of these studies, only to be told they were classified.

Coalition members believe there could be health risks from irradiated food. Sasso pointed out a 1975 study by two Indians where malnourished children fed irradiated wheat developed polypoid cells that could be an indication of cancer.

They're concerned that deadly botulism spores would remain after low doses of radiation, while organisms that fight botulism would be killed off; they worry that irradiation could destroy essential amino acids and vitamins; they pointed out that irradiation produces new chemical substances called radiolytic products that little is known about.

The FDA has an answer to all these concerns. As for botulism, the FDA notes that the low doses of radiation used wouldn't kill all spoilage bacteria. Therefore, a consumer would know the food with botulism was spoiled and wouldn't ingest the deadly botulism spores.

Available data, the FDA states, shows that food irradiated up at the allowable amount of radiation will have the same nutritional value as comparable food that hasn't been irradiated.

As for creating new, unknown chemical products, the FDA says that at the allowable level of radiation, the concentration of these new chemical products in foods is so low that they are nearly impossible to detect.

Another benefit cited by proponents is the killing of insects in grains and other stored foods, making it simpler to ship foods to other countries and other states and eliminating the need to use post-harvest fumigants on food.

This would come in handy because ethylene dibromide (EDB), a once popular fumigant, has been banned. It also would come in handy during infestations like the Medfly that inundated California crops, making it impossible to ship the state's produce elsewhere, proponents noted.

Opponents noted that irradiation after harvest won't stop the use of pesticides before harvest and no one knows what will happen when pesticides come into contact with radiation.

They have arguments against almost all the so-called benefits, including elimination of trichinosis. Sprinsock claimed there is a simple chemical test that can be administered to live hogs to check for the parasite. This test, developed in France, is used all over the world, he said.