Food and food ingredients treated with ionising radiation

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Long-awaited legislation on the irradiation of food was approved yesterday 8 December by the joint Parliament/Council Conciliation Committee. The full House is expected to adopt the text in January at about the same time as the Council. The aim is to harmonize national laws so as to create a level playing field in this area of the single market. At present, according to the rapporteur, Undine-Uta BLOCH VON BLOTTNITZ (Greens, D), food irradiation is a commercial practice in only three Member States (France, Belgium and the Netherlands), while Germany and Sweden have banned it. The original Commission proposal was made in 1988. Parliament held a first reading in 1989, but the second reading was held up until February this year pending agreement in Council on a common position. The final compromise texts incorporate much of the substance of the 14 second-reading amendments adopted by Parliament. The legislation adopted involves two texts: 1. A framework directive on the approximation of the laws of the Member States concerning food and food ingredients treated with ionizing radiation. The directive lays down conditions for the manufacture, marketing, import and compulsory labelling of irradiated foodstuffs and for the authorization of irradiation facilities; 2. An implementing directive establishing a Community list of foods and food ingredients treated with ionizing radiation. Initially, the list contains only one category of food (dried aromatic herbs, spices and vegetable seasonings). Other foods can only be added to the list via the codecision procedure. In the meantime, Member States may maintain existing restrictions. Council accepted Parliament's view that ionizing radiation should not be used as a substitute for hygiene or health practices or good manufacturing or agricultural practice. It also accepted a parliamentary amendment acknowledging that consumers may have cause for concern about the consequences of the use of food irradiation. Parliament was also keen to ensure that the methods used to test whether foodstuffs have been irradiated are effective. To meet this concern, the Council agreed that Member States must inform the Commission of the test methods used and that these methods must be standardized or validated.