Food and food ingredients authorised for treatment with ionising radiation

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PURPOSE: To assess future proposals for the extension of a positive list cataloguing irradiated foods and food ingredients. CONTENT: Two Directives currently regulate the EU market in irradiated foods. The first, a framework Directive (1999/2/EC), covers general and technical aspects relating to processing, labelling and authorisation. The second, an implementing Directive (1999/3/EC) establishes a Community list of food and food ingredients authorising foods suitable for treatment with ionising radiation. The positive list contains a single food category only: "dried aromatic herbs, spices and vegetable seasonings". Under the provisions of the framework Directive the Commission is obliged to offer proposals extending the list of foods and food ingredients to be catalogued under the positive lists by 31 December 2000. The safety aspect of irradiated food has been extensively investigated by a number of scientific studies instigated by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organisation. There appears to be a scientific consensus suggesting that the irradiation of any food up to a maximum dose of 10 kGy is considered safe. Indeed, the WHO encourages the use of the irradiation process in order to reduce the incidence of food borne diseases caused by micro-organisms. This same study group concluded in 1999 that food irradiated with the maximum dose is both safe to consume and importantly, nutritionally adequate. Currently, Member States are free to assess which foods should be irradiated. Application of this method varies considerably from member state to member state. As the Communication notes, however, in practice only very few foods and food ingredients are actually irradiated. The percentage of a particular food which is treated by ionising radiation is in most cases small. Prior to preparing an update of the positive list the Commission sent out a consultation paper seeking the opinion of those involved in, or interested in, the matter of irradiated food and food ingredients. In total it received 33 responses. Firstly, there is the opinion of consumer organisations, which argues forceable against the extension of the positive list. They suggest there is no "reasonable technological need" for irradiated food. Rather, they feel priority should be given to the improvement of food production at primary level, in storage and during the manufacturing process. Secondly, there is the opinion of those in favour of food irradiation. Voices in favour stem largely from the irradiation industry, FAO/WHO, the US government and some research associations/institutes. Their main argument is that food irradiation is safe and contributes to increasing consumer protection. Furthermore, global trade liberalisation through the WTO requires that national authorities base their regulations on Codex Standards, sound science and proper risk analysis. Lastly, there is the opinion of the food producing industry itself. They are largely against extending the number of products subject to irradiation in that they fear a consumer backlash against such products. They also argue that current procedures to ensure good hygiene are sufficient. Until such time that consumer confidence in the process of irradiation grows, the food industry proposes postponing the matter of extending the list. Recognising the polarisation of this matter, the Commissionproposes three options. Proposing a list in which a real technological need has been identified. This would cover peeled shrimps and frog legs. The second option would be to include deep frozen aromatic herbs, dried fruit, cereal flakes and germs, chicken offal, egg white, gum arabic, peeled shrimps and frog legs. And lastly, the third option would be to regard the current list as complete. In the meantime the Commission will seek a wider ranging debate on this matter prior to launching new proposals.