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## Reply to Letter

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# More fish stories on food irradiation

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

*EIR* recently received the following letter from Vancouver, B.C.: "A friend passed on a Nov. 14, 1986 copy of *EIR*. I was frankly astounded at the article on food irradiation. In my researches I've discovered that not only is food irradiation expensive and dangerous, it's also useless! The enclosed paper is self-explanatory.

"This past summer a shipload of stinking fish was turned away by port inspectors in the U.K. The fish was taken to the Netherlands, irradiated, and returned to the U.K. where it passed inspection. Can you imagine the abuses this process will lend itself to? I am ashamed to say my country is pushing this nonsense on us too.

"Except for deodorizing rotten fish, anything food irradiation does (or rather is supposed to do) can be done cheaper and safer by other means including trichinosis control in pork, salmonella control in fish and poultry, disinfestation of grain, etc.

"The only shelf-life food irradiation will extend is that of the international nuclear establishment. Do we really have to go along with their con game?"

### What irradiation can and cannot do

As long as the fish stories of the antinuclear environmentalists prevail over reason, the relatively affluent Western consumer can continue the luxury of denying the vast amount of factual information on food irradiation. For the developing nations—faced with a starving or semi-starving populations and crop losses of up to 60% because of insects, rodents, and fungus damage—reason must prevail.

Food irradiation at low doses can prolong the shelf life of fruits and vegetables, can kill trichina in pork and salmonella in chicken, can disinfest fruits and grains after harvest. At higher doses, food irradiation can sterilize the food product, enabling it to be stored indefinitely without refrigeration. (This sterilized food is what the astronauts eat in space; the process was chosen for this purpose because it provided the most nutritious, tasty, and safe way of feeding our space travelers.)

Is the process economical? According to recent studies, it is; and as new irradiation technologies using electron beam

accelerators and x-rays are commercialized, food irradiation will likely become still cheaper.

The "paper" sent by the reader is a letter written by a former food irradiation researcher at the University of California at Davis who worked with fruits and vegetables in 1962-72, Noel F. Sommer. Sommer lists various problems he found with the process, claiming that it damages fruits and is more expensive than other disinfestation measures like chemicals and cold storage. (Unlike the irrational anti-nukes, Sommer does not claim that the gamma irradiation is dangerous to the consumer.)

The point is that Sommer's 15-year-old data have been superseded not only by new studies internationally, but by commercialization of the very processes he claims won't work and cost too much. The Netherlands, for example, successfully irradiates and sells strawberries. Israel has successfully irradiated citrus fruits; China has marketed apples; Bangladesh has marketed onions and shallots; and Hawaii intends to disinfest its papaya crop using irradiation.

Fruits and vegetables are particularly delicate, and each product requires precise timing and dosage depending on the mass of the product, its skin type, and so on. In some cases gamma irradiation may not be appropriate because the quality of the product after irradiation is not acceptable. But this is no reason to unilaterally rule out the use of irradiation for other fruits and vegetables.

As for the idea that gamma irradiation would be too expensive, Sommer and the anti-nuclear activists seem to be too busy using his old data to notice that today chemical disinfestation agents like EDB are banned and that increased energy rates have made cold storage more expensive than it was in the 1960s. What should the Caribbean nations for example, do with their citrus and tropical fruit crops that they will no longer be able to export because of the ban on EDB? Rather than starve, they have decided to disinfest their crops using gamma irradiation.

When I telephoned Sommer to ask him how he could reconcile the use of his 1960s data in the face of contradictory evidence, such as that put forward by the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology in their July 1986 report on food irradiation, his reply was, "I don't believe that people who I believe are qualified have that position." When questioned further, Sommer added that other people who supported food irradiation and who were working on it at the University of California at Davis "don't know what they are talking about." In other words, if you disagree with Sommer, you must not be "qualified" to make a judgment.

Food irradiation has the potential of immediately increasing the food supply, by preserving and disinfesting the 25% of our food products here in the United States that routinely go to waste before they are usefully consumed. However, there is one thing that food irradiation *cannot* do: take the stink out of "stinking fish," a fact that hopefully should put an end to the particularly preposterous fish story repeat in the letter to the editor.