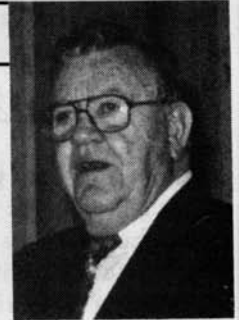


Interview: Sam Whitney



Irradiation is best way to prevent food poisoning

After 40 years of research, the first U.S. commercial food irradiation plant, Vindicator of Florida, is opening for business in Mulberry, making it possible—finally—for Americans to enjoy the benefits of this technology. Food irradiation has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for fresh fruits and vegetables, spices, and poultry. Internationally, there are 36 countries that have approved the process for some 50 products.

A chief benefit will be consumer health: At present about 33 million Americans are struck by food-borne illnesses every year, and about 4,000 of them die. The use of food irradiation will combat this growing problem. As Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Edward Madigan put it, "Irradiation is the best method to kill the things that cause food poisoning."

Vindicator chairman Sam Whitney was interviewed July 11 by Marjorie Mazel Hecht, managing editor of 21st Century Science & Technology magazine. 21st Century is campaigning to support this beneficial technology, and food irradiation is featured in its Fall 1991 issue.

Q: How did the idea for the Vindicator plant come about?

Whitney: It started in 1985 when the Environmental Protection Agency determined that they were going to ban the chemical ethylene dibromide, EDB, as a post-harvest fumigant. Quite a number of citrus people were very upset and didn't know what they were going to use to control fruit fly larvae for export to those states where our fruit would be a threat to their agriculture.

A group came down here and wanted to build a plant. Their name was Vindicator Industries. They wanted to sell stock to a number of us in Plant City, Tampa, and the Lakeland area. After a couple of meetings, I made the suggestion that we form our own company and see if Vindicator Industries was going to be successful. Instead of giving them the money then, I suggested that we name ourselves Vindicator of Florida and then merge with them when they got going and have no problem with the name. But I didn't see us giving them \$400-500,000 and have them go back up North and maybe call us and say, "Pardon me, we're broke."

They agreed to that, and we formed our company. The state commissioner of agriculture was here. I agreed, because of my business experience, that I would give six months of

my life to get the company formed to help Florida agriculture with this post-harvest process to help with the problem of having EDB canceled.

Q: That was back in 1985; that's a long six months.

Whitney: I found out later, after I had agreed to do it, for free—and I'm still here for free, by the way—that we weren't well enough informed yet. We still needed approval to irradiate fruits and vegetables in the United States. So we got involved in it, getting the fruit and vegetable approval from the Food and Drug Administration in December 1985.

Then we started to build the plant, and in 1986 we found out that we had to have dosimetry levels established. So I started attending regular meetings of the World Health Organization, and we learned more and more about [the food-borne bacteria] salmonella and campylobacter, and how this technology could control that and make chicken safe to eat. We were concerned also about shellfish, so we went to work on getting approvals for that.

So I've stayed here through all this. We started out with 14 of us. More people came in, bringing the group up to 32. We put out private placements with some money from other growers and doctors, bringing our investors up to 75. Then after we got poultry approved, we got our design finished and then went for our permits to build the plant. In 1991, we decided to go public. Now we have over 600 shareholders and we have our plant fully funded with no debt.

Q: What will the plant handle?

Whitney: This will be the first plant in the United States that's designed to handle food only. Other plants are designed differently, using more cobalt-60, to sterilize medical supplies and to do herbs and spices.

Our capacity here will depend on the dosage and the amount of time necessary to process the product.

If we're doing fruits and vegetables, we'll probably do 500 to 600 million pounds a year. We're going to be able to do a full truckload of most produce at one time. We have 18 pallets that will be processed, going through the plant at one time.

When you get up to killing bacteria that can kill you—like salmonella and cholera—it will probably take 45 minutes to do a truckload. At that rate, we could probably process

250 million pounds a year. We think that this first plant will do a mix of products.

Q: So you'll do some fruits and vegetables and some poultry?

Whitney: Yes, and we should have shellfish approved if we all get together. The FDA has shellfish under consideration now. You know, the poultry industry is still selling a lot of poultry. But the shellfish industry has been devastated by the discovery of cholera in our raw shellfish. So that industry is on its knees, and people are being denied the opportunity to enjoy those tasty tidbits because we haven't gotten FDA approval yet. We've been urging people here to write to the FDA because they have an application in now that's under review, but we'd like to have them handle it a little bit quicker not only so people could enjoy the seafood, but also because fishermen here are going broke faster than they can count them.

Q: I don't understand why anybody who likes to eat would not want to have clean, safe produce. And if fruits and vegetables are irradiation processed, they can be allowed to ripen before they're picked, so you get a much better flavor.

Whitney: That's correct.

Q: You'll be doing strawberries—

Whitney: Yes, we'll delay maturation. But on citrus, we'll

only irradiate those fruits that are going into California, Texas, and parts of Arizona and Louisiana, because the fruit fly larvae in the rind don't mean a damn in New York, Massachusetts, or Virginia [where citrus is not grown]. . . . Now, there's a big market in Japan. And eventually we'll probably be irradiating their fresh citrus.

But a guy named Walter Burnstein, an osteopath from New Jersey, threatened to declare a boycott and has temporarily scared the hell—that's a good word; that's in the Bible—out of some of the citrus people here. Although we have over 100 shareholders that are citrus producers, the powers that be have not proceeded to get the approval in Japan yet. They are afraid of some osteopath in New Jersey.

Now the problem isn't in Japan. They have nine plants there and they've been doing irradiating—potatoes and onions—for 20 years. And they just bought two more plants. The problem is the osteopath in New Jersey that scares some people.

Q: What type of irradiator do you have and what type of setup?

Whitney: We have the main one that's used all over the world. It's manufactured by the former Atomic Energy Commission of Canada, which is today called Nordion International. And I think that they built about 90% of the equipment for the irradiators used today in the world. Of the 39 big ones

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here in the United States, they built 33 of them.

We worked with them with our own architect-engineers for a couple of years and we took the best of what they had from other plants in Holland and the United States. We think we now have the finest plant in the world, state of the art in everything. We helped them develop a more modern computer system for the safety part, and we actually cut the operating cost about a third by doing that, although we spent a fortune on engineering to get where we are. . . .

Q: Do you have plans for expansion?

Whitney: Our plant now couldn't handle just the poultry that's eaten on the lower east coast of Florida. Florida itself has a billion pounds of poultry a year. When plant number 1 opens, I think it will be followed by plants number 2, 3, 4, and we'll keep going. Of course, our company will be vitally interested in working with any group anywhere to build additional plants.

Forty-five billion pounds of poultry are consumed each year in the U.S., and once people start buying safe poultry, they're going to want more of it. That's why the poultry industry is not cooperating with us now. They say we're going to hurt their business until they get geared up. That will take probably five, six, seven years.

Once we go out with safe poultry, people will begin to know that the rest of it may have salmonella and campylobacter. In the past the poultry industry has been able to keep a lid on that kind of information. . . .

I've talked to the chairmen of the board and the chief executive officers of four major poultry processors, and they all tell me, "Sam, you're just 10 years ahead. It's the only way to have premium poultry, but our sales people now say sales are the best in history, and they claim that you're going to hurt our business"—and that's probably true.

Q: I think that they are making too much of a small group of environmentalists, the Food & Water group.

Whitney: They're not environmentalists. You're talking about people who call themselves environmentalists. Real environmentalists are *for* this technology. One of the environmentalists in Florida who's been writing articles for the last 20 years and won national awards is pro-food irradiation. She gives speeches in schools about why we should have irradiated poultry.

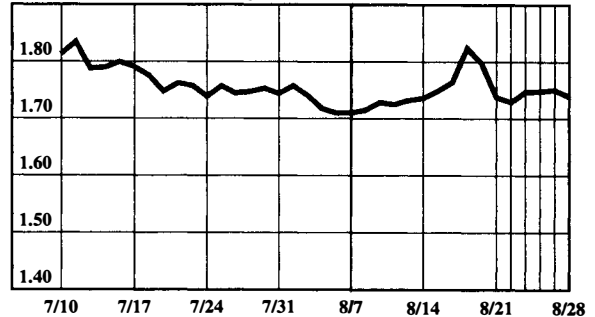
Q: I think that the radical environmentalists—we call them eco-terrorists—have stolen the name environmentalist for themselves.

Whitney: They're interested in money. They don't care about the environment. They don't care about campylobacter. If you call Food & Water's number, 1-800-EAT-SAFE, and give your name and address, you get back some undated materials and a request to send money. If you send money, that makes you an environmentalist.

Currency Rates

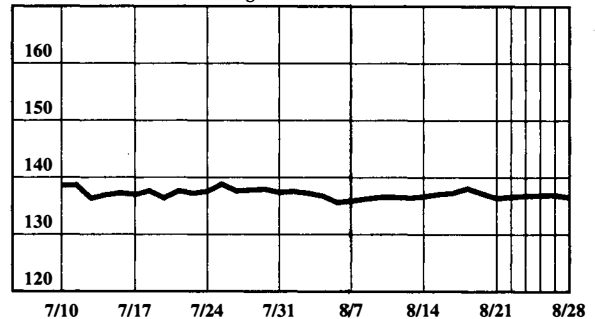
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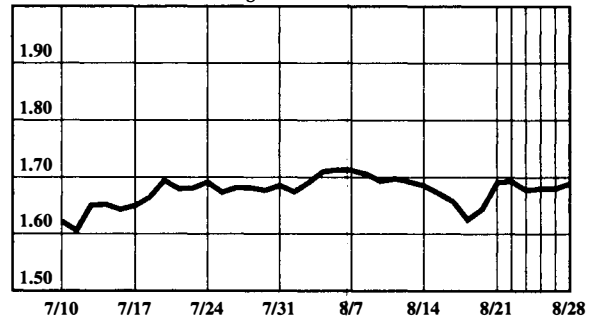
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