

Irradiation: Potential Boon To Pork Industry?

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NEWARK, Del. — Being the fourth of five children has resulted in an interesting upbringing for me but not as interesting as life is now. You see, three of my four brothers and sisters settled on Delmarva, while my oldest sister left for New York City. Talk about the city mouse and the country mouse! Whenever she's in town, I get up-to-date information on current happenings in the Big Apple.

Sometimes these updates relate to agriculture, and that's the reason for this column. It appears that one of the big concerns in New York at the present time is food irradiation. Since irradiation has a potential impact on the pork industry, I thought it worth some discussion.

Irradiation is a food processing technique that sterilizes food. The process has been used in the past to sterilize disposable medical supplies such as syringes and needles commonly found on the farm. Over 30 percent of all disposable medical supplies are

currently sterilized in this fashion. The process is approved in the food industry to (1) inhibit sprouting in white potatoes, (2) disinfect wheat and wheat flour of insects, (3) control microorganisms and insects in spices and seasonings and (4) eliminate the hazards of trichinosis in fresh pork.

The potential even exists for destroying salmonella bacteria and reducing nitrate levels in cured meats to prevent botulism, if higher levels of radiation than those currently approved are found safe by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration).

Most of the concern over irradiation has to do with its safety.

Food irradiation is not a new technique. In the U.S., the federal government has sponsored research for more than 20 years to look at the safety of the process. Other countries have also done research into the safety of irradiation. As a matter of fact, Japan, the Netherlands, Hungary, France, Uruguay, Israel and

Czechoslovakia currently use the process.

Even though the procedure is called food irradiation, it does not make food radioactive, and studies have shown that currently approved levels of irradiation are safe.

Irradiation is a process that produces predictable changes. Animal feeding studies have shown that radiolytic products (those produced through the process) pose no long- or short-term problems. Irradiation doesn't cause any bacterial growth problems, and food quality is reduced no more than it is by traditional processing methods.

Having established the safety of this process, the point to

remember is that irradiation can open new doors for the pork industry. Currently, pork must be cooked to an internal temperature of 170 degrees F to eliminate any chance of trichinosis. Having trichina-free pork would eliminate the need to cook all pork well done. Instead, people could prepare medium or even rare pork. This would increase the flavor and juiciness of the meat and, hopefully, once the idea caught on, boost sales, too.

Another plus for the pork industry would be reduced nitrate usage if higher irradiation levels are approved. Nitrates have received a lot of bad press in the past. The potential to substitute irradiation for some of the nitrate

without increasing the risk of botulism could also stimulate pork industry sales.

Irradiation has a lot to offer in terms of safety and shelf life of foods. The concerns expressed by people about this process are understandable and need to be addressed. After all, I'm sure there was some skepticism the first time a can of green beans was opened and eaten. And what about the first pasteurized/homogenized gallon of milk?

It's normal to challenge change. However, information about the irradiation process and the research that led to its development should help silence the skeptics and open the door to a new food processing idea.

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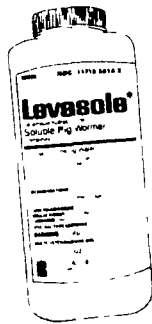
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