SECTIONS : REGIONAL NEWS

Eustice strong advocate for irradiation

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Ron Eustice, executive director for the Minnesota Beef Council, is a strong advocate for food irradiation.

There are three methods of irradiation: Gamma rays, electron beams or X-rays. All methods use a high level of energy to kill or reduce the amount of disease-causing germs or insects that live on food.

Eustice says the process has no negative effects on food quality, nutrition or taste.

"We consider it as one of the most effective tools the food industry has to reduce or eliminate harmful bacteria such as E. coli 0157:H7, salmonella and campylobacter," said Eustice.

Irradiation was approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration in 1999 and is supported by health agencies, including the American Dietetic Association, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Minnesota Department of Health.

Irradiation's critics say it decreases nutritional value and negatively changes taste and texture.

Eustice said those criticisms are false, citing the ADA's support for irradiation and numerous scientific studies that show that there are no significant changes in nutritional content of irradiated food.

To educate consumers about the benefits of food irradiation, the Minnesota Beef Council has joined forces with the American National CattleWomen to

conduct more than 60 educational activities funded by the Beef Checkoff Program in two dozen states. Additionally, the Minnesota Beef Council has conducted hundreds of activities with private funding in about 30 states. The events targeted health professionals, university scientists, university officials and the general public.

They also served more than a million samples of irradiated ground beef to the public since 1999.

Participants filled out a survey to document their reactions.

"Over ninety-eight percent of people said irradiated ground beef tasted 'good, great, delicious and excellent,'" said Eustice.

Opponents of irradiation also argue that it may encourage processors to not take the time or pay the cost for producing meat in a clean environment.

Eustice said this isn't the case and explained that irradiation is always used in conjunction with other sanitation methods, such as high pressure washing or steam pasteurization.

"You need sanitation, you need a clean product to begin with," he said.

He reported that most companies use two or more methods.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that harmful food-borne bacteria cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths each year in the United States.

Since 2000, the incidence of E. Coli 1057:H7 has been reduced by 80 percent.

"We're very proud of what the beef industry has done but we need to do more," said Eustice. "Our progress has slowed...we still have a small amount of bacteria in ground beef and must eliminate it totally," he said.

He reported that irradiation reduces bacteria by 99.999 percent.

Eustice said that's important for young children, those with weak immune systems or the elderly.

He explained that irradiating ground beef is especially critical with hamburger because mixing and grinding it

increases the chances of contamination.

Irradiated ground beef has been in American grocery stores since 2000 and can be found in many Minnesota supermarkets.

Some companies, including Schwan's and Omaha Steaks, sell irradiated hamburger.

All irradiated foods sold for retail contain an international logo known as the radura symbol on the packaging. There may also be a written statement that the food has been irradiated. However, the logo isn't required if only a minor ingredient in the product, such as a spice, has been irradiated.

Irradiation has also been approved for poultry, grains, many seafoods, fruits and vegetables.

A process similar to food irradiation is used to sterilize medical equipment for surgeries or implants to decrease the chances of infection.

NASA uses irradiation at a higher level than approved for general use to kill bacteria on food for astronauts to reduce food-borne illnesses.

Back to Top