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A Food Irradiation

Fact Sheet

Importing Irradiated Fruit and Vegetables: Flawed Public Policy and False Hope

In 2002, the U.S. government – often ahead of the rest of the world in advancing global trade and questionable technologies – legalized the importation of irradiated fruit and vegetables. To transnational food conglomerates, the new policy is a shot in the arm. To U.S. farmers, particularly family operations and other small-scale outfits, it is a slap in the face. Ostensibly intended to reduce the risk of infestation by fruit flies and other non-native pests, the ruling could have devastating side-effects. The U.S. agriculture industry – already reeling from the rising tide of low-cost imports from developing nations – will find itself at a further disadvantage. What's more, the ruling legalizes the importation of potentially infested, *non*-irradiated produce into 33 states, which could cause new exotic pest outbreaks and worsen infestations that already plague several southern states, particularly California, Florida and Texas.

The ruling came out of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Originally established to block the importation of fruit and vegetables that could carry non-native pests, APHIS has increasingly – and admittedly – changed its focus to encourage imports, despite the well-known risks of infestation.

Though the new policy is designed to prevent the infestation of 12 species of exotic pests, the sheer number of fruit and vegetables that can serve as "hosts" for these pests is huge. Among the 12 species are some of the world's most virulent and destructive pests (called "nasties" by entomologists), including the Mediterranean fruit fly, which attacks nearly all fleshy fruits and has infested four continents; and the Melon fly, which has been recorded to use more than 125 different plants as hosts.

The new policy puts every region of the U.S. at risk of infestation, because non-irradiated fruit and vegetables that could carry exotic pests can now be imported into 33 central and northern states. Only after the products are unloaded will they be irradiated, which could allow fruit flies to escape and thrive in these areas. In fact, the USDA has acknowledged – in a federal court case – that 45 states have significant production of crops that would be vulnerable to the Mexican fruit fly alone.[1]

And, because irradiation extends shelf life by delaying ripening and slowing spoilage, another harmful side-effect is that people will be eating fruit and vegetables that have been shipped and stored for weeks on end. All the while, the food will be losing vitamins and other nutrients, as well as its freshness.

Another Blow to U.S. Farmers

Behind its apparent good intentions, the APHIS ruling is flawed in several significant ways.

First, the new policy contains no provisions whatsoever for enhancing the export of U.S.-grown fruits and vegetables. This could spell further economic hardship for U.S. agriculture, which has suffered huge financial losses due to ostensibly reciprocal trade agreements – such as NAFTA – that have not lived up to their promises of increased access to foreign markets. With imports on the rise, U.S. agriculture exports fell from a record of $60 billion in 1996 to $53 billion in 2001.

The new policy will further poison the marketplace for American growers, as imports from countries with low labor costs and lax environmental laws will increase further still.

In recent testimony to Congress, the United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association stated:

"Fruit and vegetable imports receive virtually open

access to the U.S. market. Unfortunately, many of our trading partners have failed to follow our example. Such unfettered access has resulted in increasing strains on many sectors of our industry. The impact of these disparities have resulted in not only lost markets and economic strains on the industry, but also our present trade deficit in horticultural products."[2]

Instead of using complicated thermal and chemical processes that vary from crop to crop, exporters will be able to kill invasive pests and gain access to U.S. markets with the mere flip of a switch.

More Unwelcome Visitors

Second, the new policy will likely hit California the hardest. With $28 billion in annual sales, California is by far the largest agricultural producer in the U.S. The state ranks first in the production of many crops, including citrus, grape, tomato, avocado, peach, lemon, cantaloupe, nectarine, plum, honeydew, apricot and kiwifruit. And it ranks second in orange, watermelon, pear, grapefruit and tangerine.[3]

Each of these crops serves as a host to one or more of the pests listed in the APHIS ruling. Now that these crops can simply be irradiated and exported to the U.S., growers in California – and the rest of the country, for that matter – will face even more competition from developing nations. For example, irradiation will stoke the importation of grapefruit and oranges from Mexico, grapes from Algeria, and kiwifruit and tangerines from Greece.

Third, the rule contains no scientific or any other type of justification whatsoever for allowing the importation of non-irradiated fruit and vegetables into 33 Central and Northern states. The rule merely states that fruit flies "would not survive the winter" in these states. It defies explanation why the USDA would allow the importation of even more fruit and vegetables that can serve as hosts for invasive pests without fully studying the matter. This oversight becomes harder to believe when one considers that infestations cost the USDA and the U.S. agriculture industry at least $33 million per year.[4]

Also troublesome is the fact that APHIS – as it is – inspects less than 2 percent of imported agricultural products. The new policy is expected to vastly expand imports, thus increasing the risk of further infestation and the illegal importation of more banned products.

Further, the USDA itself says that, in the absence of adequate management, fruit flies could cause $1.8 billion in damage per year.[5] (All told, the 50,000 foreign plant and animal species that have become established in the U.S. over the past 200 years have caused an estimated $138 billion in damage per year.[6])

The USDA also seems to be ignoring what one of the agency's own risk analysis officials recently told the U.S. General Accounting Office: there is a general lack of information about the success of measures to prevent the importation of invasive species.[7] Though requested on several occasions, APHIS has produced infestation risk assessments for only 4 of the 12 species covered under the new policy.

The eight pest species for which APHIS failed to produce risk assessments include:

- The Queensland fruit fly, which is the most serious fruit and vegetable pest in Australia, an increasingly important trading partner of the U.S. and Canada. It infests all nearly all commercial fruits from Australia, including citrus and mango.
- The West Indian (Antillean) fruit fly, which mainly infests citrus and is the major mango pest. It also infests pear, guava, and tropical fruits and nuts.
- The Malaysian fruit fly, which mainly infests tomato, pepper, chilis, potato, eggplant and other solanaceous crops. It originates from many countries that developed nations are eyeing for export crops, including China, India, Malaysia and Thailand.[8,9]

It's Not About the Environment

Also flawed is food industry hype that irradiation can replace the insecticide methyl bromide, an ozone-depleting chemical that must be phased out by 2005. A vast majority of methyl bromide is used as a soil fumigant; irradiation cannot be used as such. And, APHIS itself has acknowledged that irradiation would not be a cost-effective replacement for the post-harvest use of methyl bromide as a quarantine measure.[10]

Taken together, these shortcomings unmask the APHIS ruling as flawed public policy that not only further threatens the economic health of American farmers, but also offers false hope to efforts to block the entry of non-native pests.

Notes

[1] *California Avocado Commission et al v. Ann M. Veneman et al.* U.S. District Court, Eastern District of California, CIV-F-01-6578 REC/SMS, filed Dec. 18, 2001.
[2] Agriculture Trade Program Testimony. Statement by United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association, Farm Bill Oversight Hearing on International Trade, Committee on Agriculture, United States House of Representatives, June 28, 2001.
[3] Agriculture Statistical Review, California Dept. of Food & Agriculture.
[4] Fruit Fly Program Information. Plant Protection and Quarantine, APHIS, USDA.
[5] "Invasive Species: Clearer Focus and Greater Commitment Needed to Effectively Manage the Problem." U.S. General Accounting Office, Oct. 22, 2002.
[6] Invasive Species Factsheet. APHIS, USDA, October 1999.
[7] Note 5, op. cit.
[8] Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations.
[9] Department of Entomology and Nematology, University of Florida.
[10] 67 Federal Register 65016, Oct. 23, 2002.

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