



**PUBLIC CITIZEN
ACTIVE CONSUMERS DENMARK**

For Immediate Release:
14 May 2002

Contact:
Wenonah Hauter, +1.202.454.5150
Klaus Melvin Jensen, +45.2662.4576
Merav Shub, +44.(0) 207.837.9229

News Release

U.S. Farm Bill's Irradiation Labeling Provisions Could Harm European Consumers, Damage Confidence in U.S. Food Imports

U.S. and European Consumer Groups Call for Increased Vigilance Over Labels

WASHINGTON, D.C.— New U.S. legislation on labeling irradiated food harms consumers' right-to-know and could seriously damage European consumer confidence in food imported from the United States, according to Public Citizen and Active Consumers Denmark, two watchdog groups working together to protect consumers.

Controversial amendments in the new Farm Bill give the industry several chances to label irradiated food as being pasteurized and call for a re-examination of the labeling of irradiated foods. While the new labeling process is being determined, one provision in the bill provides significant leeway for immediately mislabeling irradiated products as "pasteurized."

"This bow to industry lobbying not only threatens U.S. consumers' right to truthful and accurate labeling, but may also complicate already tense labeling issues in trade with European countries," said Jennifer Peterson, an organizer for Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program.

In Europe, all foods intended for consumers and mass caterers must be labeled as either "irradiated" or "treated with ionizing radiation," whether they are whole foods or ingredients, even if they constitute less than 25 percent of the finished product. In contrast, U.S. regulations require only irradiated foods sold in stores to be labeled, although spices are exempted.

Non-labeled irradiated food imported from the United States has been found in European supermarkets over the past year, causing alarm among European consumers and resulting in some U.S. products being pulled from store shelves. In Denmark, a guacamole mix imported from the States was recently found to contain irradiated components but was not labeled as irradiated. The product was subsequently pulled from all Danish supermarkets for violating domestic labeling laws.

"With the new U.S. Farm Bill causing confusion about the labeling of irradiated products, we strongly fear that there will be more cases of illegal irradiated U.S. food in Danish supermarkets, and that

could seriously harm Danish consumer confidence in U.S. produced food," said Klaus Melvin Jensen, campaign manager of Active Consumers Denmark, which discovered the illegal product.

Irradiation uses gamma rays, X-rays or accelerated electrons that alter the molecular structure of food in an attempt to kill pathogens and insects. The process destroys nutrients, may change the taste, smell, and appearance of food, and produces new chemical compounds, some of which have been found to promote cancer and cause genetic and cellular damage in rats and human cells. Irradiation is a distinct process that is very different from pasteurization, which uses rapid heating and cooling to partially sterilize liquid products, namely milk.

"There is no reason for Europeans to lower their standards to meet the trade agendas of reckless U.S. companies," said Wenonah Hauter, director of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program. "U.S. companies are proving irresponsible in their labeling of irradiated goods. We urge Europeans to continue removing irradiated American products from their grocery shelves."

Numerous unlabeled irradiated products also have been found on sale in the United Kingdom, including U.S. products such as ginseng health supplements.

"Supporters of irradiation insist it is perfectly safe when carried out correctly, and then dismiss the very real dangers of misuse, bad practice and poor enforcement," said Merav Shub, irradiation campaign coordinator for the London-based Food Commission. "Why should consumers believe irradiation industry assurances when even their basic right to know is flouted through the sale of illegal, unlabeled irradiated food products in High Street shops?"

Due to widespread consumer rejection of irradiated food, the irradiation industry is seeking to use misleading euphemistic labels it deems less threatening to consumers, such as "cold pasteurized" and "electronically pasteurized." But consumer focus groups in the U.S. have unanimously rejected such alternative wording as "sneaky" and "deceptive."

The use of the term "pasteurization" in irradiated food labels runs counter to the official U.S. position on labeling of export products. In a discussion paper on misleading food labels, the U.S. delegation to the Codex Committee on Food Labeling, an international food-standard setting body, wrote, "Confusion often occurs because a promotional communication uses a word, phrase, symbol or image that is similar to a more familiar word, phrase, symbol or image, but that does not have a similar meaning. This may be of particular concern when labels are translated or a product is exported."

###

Public Citizen is a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.citizen.org.

Active Consumers is a green consumer organization based in Denmark. For more information, visit www.activeconsumers.org and www.aktiveforbrugere.dk