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National Farmers Union Submission regarding
proposed Regulations Amending the Food and Drug Regulations (Food Irradiation)
per *Canada Gazette*, Part I June 9, 2016.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) opposes the proposed amendment to the Food and Drug Regulations that would permit the use of ionizing irradiation on fresh and frozen ground beef.

The proposed amendment would allow beef processors to subject fresh ground beef to 1 - 4.5 kilorays and frozen ground beef to 1.5 - 7 kilorays absorbed dose of ionizing radiation respectively. The rationale for the regulatory change is the claim that it would offer an additional food safety measure. The request for this change is apparently in reaction to the 2012 XL Foods incident where a large quantity of beef was contaminated by *e coli* 0157, resulting in a number of illnesses and Canada's largest food recall.

A previous request asking Health Canada to approve irradiation of ground beef came from a meat industry lobby group in 1998. Notably, it was the meat industry - not consumers or retailers - who asked for it. The request led to a regulatory proposal in 2002 that failed because of the high degree of public opposition. A second, similar request came from the same lobby group in 2013, which has resulted in Health Canada preparing the current regulatory proposal.

Canada's beef packing industry is dominated by two foreign-owned multinational corporations that slaughter over 90% of federally inspected beef in Canada: JBS and Cargill, with headquarters in Sao Paulo, Brazil and Minnetonka, Minnesota respectively. JBS bought XL Foods from the Nilsson Brothers in 2013, following the *e coli* outbreak at the Lakeside plant in Alberta. Irradiation equipment is costly, thus we can assume that these two companies would be in the best position to benefit from the proposed regulatory change.

Irradiating ground beef reduces populations of disease-causing microbes (pathogens) in the meat. Carcasses become contaminated with pathogens such as *e coli* when fecal matter from the intestines and/or hides is allowed to come into contact with the meat during processing. Proponents claim

irradiation gives ground beef a longer shelf life and reduces the risk of (and potential liability for) food poisoning illness in consumers exposed to uncooked meat.

JBS and Cargill would have the capacity to spread the cost of expensive irradiation equipment over their high volume of sales. This means they could choose to use irradiation to cut costs, which would allow them to undercut smaller companies and thereby increase their market domination by driving these competitors out of business. With fewer abattoirs and packers, the options of both farmers and consumers would shrink, as they would increasingly be forced to sell/buy from JBS and Cargill. Reducing choices makes it easier for the two dominant meat companies to pay beef producers less for their animals and to charge higher prices to retailers and the consumers who ultimately buy and eat ground beef.

Ground beef irradiation is already permitted in the USA. The specific level of ionizing radiation requested by the lobby group that petitioned for the amendment mirrors the existing American regulation. If adopted, the new regulation would make it possible to import irradiated ground beef from the USA. These imports would displace beef slaughtered and processed in Canadian plants. Jobs associated with meat packing in Canada would be lost as a result. Cattle prices paid to our farmers would also be pressured downward to compete with cheaper imported US beef. The proposed amendment would not only permit irradiation of fresh and frozen ground beef, but because it is identical to the corresponding US regulation, it would effectively erase the Canadian border in regard to ground beef.

The European Union does not allow irradiation of meat. Canadian trade negotiators highlight the increased market access for our beef that would result if the CETA deal is ratified. If there is any expectation that this market could be served, it would make sense to invest in production and processing methods that do not use synthetic hormones and prophylactic antibiotics instead of adding yet another technology that the European market has rejected. Japan is another important export market that has rejected irradiation of meat. Thus ground beef irradiation would not help Canada export more beef, yet it would make it easier for the USA to export more of its beef into our market.

Canada's food safety system is based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach. It requires food processors to analyse their procedures and identify each point where a hazard could occur and to put in place control measures to prevent the hazard from being present when the consumer purchases the product. If ground beef irradiation is allowed, we are concerned that it will be used as a final "control point" to kill some (but not necessarily all) pathogens from fecal contamination of carcasses that occurs when processing high volumes at high speeds without adequate inspection of lines. The use of irradiation could be used as a "mop up operation" to compensate for unsanitary conditions and inadequate procedures.

Irradiation may also instill a false confidence in the meat's safety. Any harmful toxins produced by dangerous bacteria that were living in the meat prior to irradiation would remain in the meat. Furthermore, once most or all microorganisms are killed by irradiation, any pathogens that remain alive or come into contact with the meat afterward would proliferate quickly, as they would not face any competition from harmless microorganisms that would otherwise be present.

Numerous reports, including the 2013 Auditor General's report, have criticized cutbacks to frontline meat inspection staffing levels and changes to procedures. The shift from actual inspection of the lines to auditing of the companies' HACCP plan compliance paperwork means that food safety has become

largely a matter of industry self-regulation. Canadians are legitimately concerned about the safety of their meat. We believe these concerns should be answered by rebuilding a robust, independent meat inspection system that has the funds and tools necessary to enforce cleanliness and prevent pathogen contamination of ground beef.

Excessive line speed and high turnover rates of workers due to low pay and dangerous working conditions contribute to food safety problems with ground beef. Irradiation will not solve these problems. If the proposed regulation leads to more ground beef imports from the US, there would be even more pressure on Canadian meat packers to cut costs by increasing line speeds and reducing wages, worsening the related food safety problems.

When a ground beef irradiation regulation was proposed in 2002, Canadians rejected it because there were too many questions and concerns about the safety of the process and the quality of the product. Irradiation can destroy vitamins, affect flavour and odour, mask unfreshness, and does not eliminate toxins produced by pathogens prior to irradiation. If there is increased public acceptance of irradiation since 2001 the change in opinion does not reflect more confidence in irradiation, but rather less confidence in a meat inspection system that now relies heavily on industry self-regulation.

The recent controversy around the decision by Earl's restaurant chain to use an American supplier of humane-certified beef raised without the use of antibiotics or added hormones indicates that a significant group of Canadian consumers are concerned about how their food is produced, how it is killed and where it comes from. Earl's was unable to find a Canadian processor that could supply the whole chain with the beef it required, and after much public outcry, it has begun to contract smaller Canadian suppliers who can provide beef to its restaurants at a regional level. Other fast food suppliers, such as the A&W chain, are seeking out beef produced without added steroids or antibiotics. They report increased beef sales as a result, even though the trend in the larger Canadian beef market is downward. If irradiation is allowed in Canada these popular restaurants will probably need to add "not irradiated" to their beef branding in order to keep their customer base.

The proposed regulation would require prepackaged irradiated ground beef to be labelled as such when sold; bulk sales would require the label to be placed nearby. This measure does not provide full transparency because many people who would consume irradiated ground beef would not be purchasing it directly. Institutions such as school lunch programs, health care facilities and homes for the aged are considered to be the important markets for irradiated ground beef in the USA. These institutions serve vulnerable populations. While some may argue that ground beef irradiation would protect them, irradiation can also promote a false sense of security as stated above.

The USA has allowed meat irradiation since 1997, but massive food safety incidents still occur. A Colorado meat packer recalled 13.5 tons of beef on July 3, 2015 due to concerns over *e coli 0-157* contamination. A Nebraska plant recalled 83 tons of ground beef contaminated with *e coli 0-157* on November 1, 2015. A Michigan plant recalled 900 tons of *e coli 0-157* contaminated ground beef on May 19, 2014. Irradiation is not a food safety panacea.

Canada has the capacity to ensure our food system is capable of delivering safe ground beef without irradiation. Consumers are increasingly concerned about where their food comes from and how it is produced. Permitting the irradiation of fresh and frozen ground beef would damage the Canadian brand in the eyes of many consumers and would allow increased imports of ground beef from US facilities that use irradiation.

We urge Health Canada to reject the proposed amendment to the Food and Drug Act and instead focus on improving the meat inspection system and promoting appropriate and effective regulations that will support a diversified, regional food processing strategy. These actions would increase Canadians' confidence in meat packers to provide them with clean, wholesome ground beef produced by Canadian farmers.

Respectfully submitted by

The National Farmers Union