

Food irradiation: Governments adopt international document

*Report
on the International Conference
on the acceptance,
control of,
and trade in irradiated food*

In December 1988, delegates meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, agreed on a set of principles for the acceptance of irradiated food in trade under strict controls by competent national authorities. Agreement was reached through a final document adopted by consensus on 16 December 1988 at the International Conference on the Acceptance, Control of, and Trade in Irradiated Food. About 250 scientists, senior government officials, and consumer representatives from 57 countries and 14 intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations attended. The conference was jointly sponsored by the IAEA, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations World Health Organization and International Trade Centre-UNCTAD/GATT.

Although not legally binding, the document is expected to significantly influence the global development of food irradiation, said Dr K.A. Gilles, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Marketing and Inspection Services in the United States who served as president of the conference. "It reflects consensus on a broad range of views," he said, "including governmental co-operation, consumer attitudes, process control, and trade."

During the week-long meeting, delegates particularly emphasized the importance of accurately informing the public about both the benefits and limitations of food irradiation, which can be easily misrepresented. In a statement to the conference, Dr J.-P. Jardel, Assistant Director General of WHO, expressed concern that the "unwarranted rejection of this process, often based on lack of understanding of what food irradiation entails,



may hamper its use in those countries which may benefit most."

In his address to the conference, Mr Maurizio Zifferero, IAEA Deputy Director General for Research and Isotopes, said that the IAEA, in co-operation with the other co-sponsoring organizations, will have a growing role to play in stimulating the harmonization of national regulations for food irradiation. He pointed out that some 70 countries have active research and development programmes in food irradiation. Of these, 36 countries have approved the process for specific food commodities. Interest is primarily tied to the technology's potential to reduce the incidence of foodborne diseases and widespread post-harvest food losses.

Conclusions and recommendations of the conference, as expressed in the final document, follow: *

Conclusions

- Food irradiation has the potential to reduce the incidence of foodborne diseases through the reduction of pathogen contamination in foods, especially in solid foods.

* The final document was adopted by consensus. A number of Member States (18) expressed their views on the document, stating either endorsement or reservations. Their statements, as well as other conference matters, are contained in the proceedings of the conference, available for purchase from the IAEA.

Photo above: Before the conference, a number of journalists and governmental delegates attended a buffet that featured selected irradiated foods. (Credit: WHO, Abramov)

- Food irradiation can reduce post-harvest food losses and make available a larger quantity and a wider variety of foodstuffs for consumers. It can also be an effective quarantine treatment for certain foods and thus contribute to international trade.

- Regulatory control by competent authorities is a necessary prerequisite for introduction of the process in accordance with the principles of the Codex General Standard for Irradiated Foods and the Recommended International Code of Practice for the Operation of Radiation Facilities Used for the Treatment of Foods. Food irradiation is not to be used as a substitute for GMPs.*

- International trade in irradiated foods would be facilitated by harmonization of national procedures based on internationally recognized standards for the control of food irradiation.

- Acceptance of irradiated food by the consumer is a vital factor in the successful commercialization of the irradiation process, and information dissemination can contribute to this acceptance.

Recommendations

- Consideration should be given to the application of food irradiation technology for public health benefits, especially for products where this process would seem advantageous.

- Consideration should be given to the application of food irradiation technology where it can, in appropriate cases, reduce post-harvest losses of food and serve as a quarantine treatment.

- Governments should ensure that, as a prerequisite to any processing of food by irradiation or sale of irradiated food, regulatory procedures for control are introduced. Key principles which should be incorporated are the registration/licensing, regulation, and inspection of food irradiation facilities, documentation and labelling of irradiated food, training of control officials, and employment of GMPs.

- Regulatory procedures for the control of the food irradiation process should be consistent with internationally agreed principles as embodied in the Codex General Standard for Irradiated Foods and associated Code of Practice. Dosimetry traceable to national or international standards should be applied during the irradiation process, providing a means of independent verification.

- Governments should encourage research into methods of detection of irradiated food so that administrative control of irradiated food once it leaves the facility can be supplemented by an additional means of enforcement, thus facilitating international trade and reinforcing consumer confidence in the overall control system.

- Labelling of irradiated food for international trade should be in line with the provisions as adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

- Governments should ensure that all phases of the planning and operation of food irradiation facilities are subject to a regulatory structure consistent with relevant internationally accepted standards for human health, safety, and environmental protection.

- Governments, especially those that envisage authorization of food irradiation, are encouraged to provide clear and adequate information about food irradiation to the public. The active participation of all interested parties, including consumers, should be encouraged.

* Editor's note: GMPs stands for good manufacturing practices.



Delegates from 57 countries attended the International Conference on the Acceptance, Control of, and Trade in Irradiated Food in Geneva from 12-16 December 1988. (Credit: WHO, Abramov)