

# Food irradiation starts up in Florida

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

Finally, a company with the foresight, funds, and persistence necessary to begin commercial food irradiation is setting up in the United States. Vindicator of Florida will open its doors in August to process fruits, vegetables, poultry, and (if the approval comes through) shellfish.

The \$6.8 million plant got its start in 1985, after the Environmental Protection Agency banned ethylene dibromide (EDB), which had been widely used as a fumigant to disinfect crops after harvest. That left the citrus growers with nothing but cold storage as an alternative, and some states and countries will not import citrus and other crops unless they can be assured that no insects or insect eggs are coming along for the ride.

Other U.S. irradiation facilities process medical supplies, cosmetics, and spices, but this will be the first full-scale commercial plant solely for food products. The new plant was built in collaboration with the Canadian firm Nordion, and is the most advanced in the world. It uses a cobalt-60 radiation source, and will be able to handle 500-600 million tons of produce a year. The plant is designed so that an entire truckload of produce can move through the plant at one time, with 18 pallets that simultaneously move produce past the radiation source.

## Benefits are tremendous

The radiation process exposes food to ionizing energy in the form of gamma rays from the radioisotope cobalt-60. (Electron beams and X-rays can also be used as ionizing sources.) The low-level radiation passes through the food and kills microbes, bacteria, insects, insect eggs or larvae, parasites, and molds. No radiation stays in the food, and the taste and texture of the food are not affected.

After 40 years of research, scientists have determined how much exposure is necessary for each product. To eliminate salmonella from poultry, for example, may take longer than the disinfestation of fruits. Scientists and the U.S. regulatory agencies have also determined that the process is safe and the processed foods wholesome.

The benefits are not just the reduction in food-borne ill-

nesses, which now affect 33 million people a year and kill an estimated 4,000. Consumers will also have the advantage of delayed maturation and therefore increased shelf-life for produce like strawberries and mushrooms, both items which frequently go to waste because they rot before they can be eaten. There is also a taste benefit. Now, many fruits are picked green in order to keep them from spoiling before they reach the market. With irradiation processing, the fruit can ripen on the vine, go through the processor, and then be shipped to the market with more of its natural flavor intact.

## The anti-science mob

Like other nuclear technologies that can improve the quality of life and increase the food supply, food irradiation has been attacked by the anti-science mob. In this case, the mob's name is Food & Water, Inc., headed by an anti-nuclear osteopath from New Jersey, Walter "Wally" Burnstein, who also runs a holistic health center. The foundation-funded Food & Water is spending \$330,000 in a 60-second radio ad campaign, starting in Florida, that tells people the lie that food irradiation "might kill you."

Burnstein admitted to the *Wall Street Journal* that this was a "desperate" tactic. "We have to use every means we have to stop this technology," he said. Burnstein's recent fund-raising letter makes it clear why they are desperate to stop Vindicator's Florida plant: "The success or failure of this facility will determine the future of the food irradiation industry in this country. . . . Once this industry starts, it will be virtually impossible to stop," Burnstein says.

Food & Water's desperate ad is backfiring, however. Sam Whitney, the president of Vindicator, said in a recent interview that the ads are so outrageous that they have created a "backlash" for food irradiation and in support of the plant. One convert, a reporter, even became a stockholder.

Whitney is urging people to write letters of support to Edward Madigan, the Secretary of Agriculture, in order to counter the thousands of letters against food irradiation from people who believe Food & Water's scare stories.

Food & Water's six-figure annual income has been built on lies about food irradiation, lies aimed at exploiting irrational fears. One of their "action packets," for example, features a "Stop Food Irradiation" Superman battling "the unholy alliance between government and businesses trying to irradiate our food with radioactive wastes." The Superman tells the frightened people, "We have three things going for us . . . the truth . . . our integrity and commitment and [in red letters] *fear*—Fear . . . that our food will be poisoned, our children, our grandchildren and the Earth will be injured."

Most interesting is that the group has retained its status as a non-profit, tax-exempt foundation despite the fact that it publicly brags about its massive lobbying effort to pass moratoria on food irradiation in New Jersey and New York. Food & Water's 1988 tax return boldly lies that it conducted no lobbying activities.