

Cloned beef flap spreads alarm in Britain

RAPHAEL G. SATTER - Associated Press Writer - Associated Press

Cloned meat is getting closer to Europeans' dinner tables whether they like it or not — or even whether they know it or not.

Although cloned cuts are perfectly legal in the United States, news this week that meat from the offspring of cloned cattle has entered the British food chain created a ruckus in a country still sensitive from its experience with mad cow disease.

The flap illustrates what industry-watchers say are the market pressures and regulatory loopholes pushing cloned meat and genetically engineered foods into the European market.

Food safety officials said Wednesday they are investigating how a bull from the embryo of a cloned U.S. cow came to be slaughtered and eaten in Britain, where farmers must apply to sell such meat.

Officials are also investigating whether milk from a cow bred from a clone made its way into the food chain.

The Food Standards Agency and leading scientists say there are no safety concerns about such milk and meat — but many Britons aren't so sure. "If that's allowed, what will they allow next?" said 62-year-old Canterbury native Trudy Smedhurst.

Under European law, foodstuffs produced from cloned animals must pass a safety evaluation and gain authorization before they can be sold. British officials say they have never received such a request.

Last month the European Parliament called for a ban on meat from cloned animals, saying there haven't been enough tests yet to prove whether it is safe for humans to eat. The legislation faces further consideration before it becomes law.

Most scientists believe it is safe.

Hugh Pennington, emeritus professor of microbiology at the University of Aberdeen, said some people were alarmed by the concept of cloning because it "has an H.G. Wells ring to it," but insisted meat and milk from cloned cows posed no health risks.

"It is just the way they have been produced that is different but there has been no messing around in its genetics, they are exactly the same as an ordinary Holstein cow or bull."

In contrast to the United States, where genetically modified crops are common and meat from cloned livestock and their offspring has been deemed safe to eat, opinion polls in Europe consistently show a public opposed to genetically modified

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food.

The French, with their strong culinary traditions and powerful farmers' lobby, are particularly opposed. So are Italians, with 72 percent voicing their opposition to genetically modified foods in a recent survey. Polls show similar levels of opposition in Germany.

British consumers have been wary of tainted beef and dairy products since an epidemic of brain-wasting mad cow disease in the 1990s that saw British beef exports banned for a decade and led to a tightening of welfare and safety standards. More than 100 people died from the human form of the disease after eating infected meat products.

The public also came out against genetically engineered crops by wide margins when the issue of growing them in Britain was mooted in 2004.

Despite public opposition, cooking oil made from genetically engineered crops, meat raised on modified feed and cheese made from the offspring of cloned cattle has already made its way into meals across the continent.

In Germany, some 60 percent to 70 percent of all foods on the market "have been in touch in one way or another with genetic modification," according to food industries association BLL.

British pub-goers sitting down to a traditional meal of steak and chips will almost certainly be eating beef reared on genetically engineered feed. Even the oil used to cook the fries is sometimes drawn from genetically modified crops.

Many European consumers have no idea. EU regulations don't require livestock breeders to notify consumers that their animals have been eating engineered feed. The British Food Standards Agency said that oils made from genetically modified crops are labeled when they're sold in bulk, but U.K. restaurants that use them rarely pass that information on to consumers.

Swiss officials said there were thought to be several hundred cattle descended from cloned animals supplying the country's supermarkets.

When there are regulations, they're often ignored. Spain has strict labeling rules for food drawn from engineered organisms, but Greenpeace said they're rarely followed.

Even in hypersensitive France, Greenpeace accused the government of sneaking Bayer AG's T25 herbicide-resistant corn onto its catalog of authorized seeds — despite regulations barring nearly every other kind of genetically modified organism. The Agriculture Ministry did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

Tougher rules would be hard to enforce, particularly in the case of animal feed.

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Britain's livestock sector, for example, is heavily dependent on high-protein soya and maize byproducts, nearly all of which are imported from the United States, Brazil and Argentina — countries which have moved aggressively to adopt genetically modified foods.

The European Feed Manufacturers' Federation said farmers across the continent had no choice but to rely on those countries.

"You could not produce livestock competitively here in Europe without access to these proteins," said federation chief Alexander Doring. "It's a simple agronomic fact."

Although many countries — such as Denmark and Norway — remain staunchly opposed to using genetically modified food under any circumstances, there are signs that European nations are starting to go their separate ways. Earlier this month, the EU effectively threw up its hands, delegating the power to approve or ban genetically modified foods to individual member states.

"There's always the danger that GM food will creep into the system," said Emma Hockridge of Britain's Soil Association, which champions organic farming.

"It's relatively tricky to keep awareness of this issue up."

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