

Editorial

Strawberries: delicious and victorious

The nation's first irradiated strawberries went on sale at Lorenzo's Italian Market in North Miami on Jan. 25, and from first-hand reports, the berries looked good, smelled good, and tasted "delicious." Within a short time, the irradiated berries were sold out, even though the non-irradiated berries were selling at \$1.69 per pint, 31¢ cheaper.

Although irradiated strawberries have sold in France, Hungary, and other countries since the 1980s, and although the United States pioneered the technology of food irradiation, the Florida plant that processed these berries is the first one to irradiate produce for domestic consumption. This fact in itself is a victory over the antiscience, antinuclear mob, which has campaigned for years against food irradiation, stopping three previous attempts in other parts of the country to commercialize this beneficial technology. The antinukes, primarily the group Food & Water, Inc., used several hundreds of thousands of dollars in foundation grants to pay for lying radio ads that told the Florida population that food irradiation "might kill you." Food & Water activists bullied elected officials, produce growers, supermarket managers, trade associations, the media, and, of course, the public—to try and stop the Vindicator plant in Mulberry, Florida, from operating.

The main thing that the Food & Water group had going for it was the profound ignorance and fear of radiation in the general population, which over the past 25 years has lost the capacity to make judgments on the basis of scientific evidence, preferring to believe the scare stories of the radical environmentalists. The media, for the most part already disposed to be antinuclear, reported in detail every allegation by Food & Water's propagandists, no matter how outrageous, and gave short shrift to the scientific community, which almost without exception backs irradiated food as safe and wholesome.

Curiously, after boasting on the radio and in print that Food & Water would have "thousands" of picketers at Lorenzo's Market Jan. 25, a convoy of 20 trucks following the delivery truck from the Vindicator plant in Mulberry to the North Miami market, and a parade

through the city that would include Ralph Nader's troops, nothing happened. At most there were six picketers, one of them Food & Water's paid staffer in Tampa. It's true that these picketers leered and jeered at the strawberry buyers and provided the usual misinformation for the many reporters present, but six picketers is a far cry from "thousands," and clearly the group did not succeed in stopping the strawberries.

Irradiated strawberries are free of bugs and will stay in the refrigerator up to three weeks without getting moldy. However, even more critical are the advantages of low-level irradiation for shellfish, poultry, and other products that harbor disease-causing pathogens. Right now in the United States, food-borne illnesses kill 200 people per week, and another 33 million people a year become ill from pathogens like salmonella and campylobacter.

The Vindicator plant is ready to irradiate poultry and shellfish, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has already approved the process for poultry as safe. (Use for shellfish is still under study.) The go-ahead has been held up since September 1991 in the Office of Management and Budget, however, which must review such regulations for "cost-effectiveness." President Bush's pledge to hold up all new regulations for three months ensures that the irradiated poultry regulations will continue to sit at OMB, unless there is a public outcry.

Insiders report that the holdup also has something to do with the Republican financial clout of the poultry industry, which fears what might happen to its market once salmonella-free poultry becomes available to a health-conscious public. The industry does not oppose irradiation processing, it should be noted; it just wants to delay it.

Readers can partake of the strawberry victory by asking your local supermarket to get some of those irradiated berries, and lobby to free the poultry regulations from the OMB. If you have ever been hoodwinked by the antinuclear kooks running around this nation—and we have reason to suspect that many of our readers have been—this is a good chance to stand up not only for your body, but also, for your mind.