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12-18-2007

HEALTH - Critics Brace For FDA Assessment Of Cloned Animal Food

Anna Edney

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Congressional interests, food industry officials and consumer advocates who oppose releasing meat and milk from cloned animals into the U.S. food supply without more time to study the issue are bracing for FDA to hand down a final risk assessment soon -- even as early as this week -- that concludes products derived from the animals are safe to eat.

Sources expect to see a repeat of last year when FDA released its draft risk assessment of cloned food a few days after Christmas, typically a time when important information can slip under the radar.

Most opponents believe more studies are needed, either on trade or safety implications, of milk and meat from cloned animals before the agency should allow human consumption.

FDA spokesman Michael Herndon would not comment on timing for its release, but said the agency is updating the draft and reviewing comments submitted since its release.

The draft excluded food derived from cloned sheep; it deemed milk and meat from other cloned animals safe.

FDA expects most food would come from the offspring of clones. Clones would be too expensive to use other than to produce superior offspring.

Sen. **Barbara Mikulski**, D-Md., squeezed a provision into the farm bill that would require the National Academy of Sciences to study the safety of cloned food and the Agriculture Department to review consumer acceptance.

"Why the urgency?" Mikulski asked. "We do not have a shortage of food in our country. We should stop the FDA from putting this into our food supply without more information and informed consent."

Mikulski's measure might come too late even if House and Senate

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negotiators keep it in the bill during conference -- which her office is confident will happen -- but FDA releases the document beforehand.

In anticipation of FDA releasing the final risk assessment, the International Dairy Foods Association, the National Milk Producers Federation and the U.S. Dairy Export Council last week wrote **Jim Greenwood**, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, urging him to institute a voluntary moratorium on milk products from cloned animals and their offspring until other major countries adopt the same standards.

"We are surprised that FDA may lift the voluntary moratorium on milk from cloned animals so soon given the overwhelming number of consumer comments and concerns that were raised during the public comment period," Connie Tipton, president of the International Dairy Foods Association, said.

BIO did not respond to requests for comment by presstime.

The milk industry fears FDA has not reviewed consumer acceptance of food from cloned animals enough to realize the impact a change will have on their trade.

The International Dairy Foods Association, which represents milk processors, estimates misperceptions about cloned products might cost their industry \$3 billion a year.

The American Meat Institute expressed the same concerns when FDA released its draft risk assessment last year.

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