

Extra Feature Story

Cloned Meat: It's What's for Dinner?

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Cloning is usually the stuff of science fiction or Hollywood cinema, but if some in the food industry have their way, cloned animals could be the stuff you eat for dinner.

Proponents of cloning livestock, including cloning companies and some ranchers, claim that the technology would yield more consistently high quality meat.

The quality of meat from conventionally bred herds is inconsistent; some meat is destined for expensive restaurants while some may be used for dog food.

But by cloning prized livestock and using them to breed top-notch livestock, supporters claim ranchers could more reliably produce only the highest quality product.

After years of study, the Food and Drug Administration released a lengthy report in January stating that "food from cattle, swine and goat clones is as safe to eat as that from their more conventionally bred counterparts."

Resistance to cloned meat

But not everyone—including another government agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its counterpart in the European Union—is convinced that your butcher should be stocking meat from clones quite yet.

Despite FDA's stamp of the approval, the USDA asked the meat industry to allow time for an "an acceptance process, given the emotional nature of this issue," said Bruce Knight, the Undersecretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, after the release of the FDA report.

Knight said the USDA was not concerned about health issues, but worried that the introduction of the new product would rouse consumer concern, especially in other countries where consumers have been extremely wary about genetically modified foods.

Apprehension about American meat imports has been a hot button issue in Asia and Europe. In South Korea, which banned American beef imports after a scare over deadly mad cow disease in 2006, concerns about American beef led to numerous violent protests and calls for the resignation of the prime minister. One protest in early July drew over 50,000 activists.

Health and moral issues

Meanwhile, the European Food Safety Authority published a long-awaited report in late July that found "no clear evidence" of health issues for humans, but expressed lingering concerns about the health of livestock.

The European Union said that its ban on clone products would continue "due to the absence of data," and "increased concerns on aspects of animal health and welfare."

Critics in the United States include consumer advocacy groups, environmentalists, animal rights activists and some religious groups.

Noting that cloned animals are more likely to get sick and die, and that the animals used to birth them are at greater risk, the chief executive of the Humane Society Chief Executive Wayne Pacelle said "the FDA did not give adequate consideration to the welfare of these animals or their surrogate mothers in its deliberations."

Even some within the cattle industry are concerned.

"It is troubling to see the FDA approval of products from cloned animals to be sold to the public, when questions surrounding the health risks, legal implications and ethical concerns remain unanswered," said Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union.

"Furthermore, there is no data to suggest any consumer demand for such products," Buis added.

Do Americans want cloned meat?

Fewer than half of the Americans polled in an industry study said they were likely to buy meat from clones if the FDA approved it. Only 10 percent said they would be "very likely" to purchase such meat.

Despite the USDA's voluntary moratorium on supplying meat from clones or their offspring, some may have already made it to the market, according to cattle experts. One producer in Kansas said he has been openly selling semen from top-tier cattle clones for years.

But with only around 600 heads of cloned livestock in the United States, and with each one costing \$6,000- \$15,000 (compared to \$300), clones are a fraction of the food supply for the moment.

-- Compiled by Alex Seitz-Wald for NewsHour Extra

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