

Shoppers Uneasy About Cloning

Poll Finds Worries Over Meat and Milk

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Two-thirds of American consumers are "uncomfortable" with animal cloning and 43 percent believe food from clones would be unsafe to eat, according to a new poll that comes as the government considers allowing products from clones into the food supply.

The poll, conducted on behalf of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, suggests that animal breeders and food producers could face resistance as they try to commercialize the technology that produced Dolly the sheep and has starred in a host of science-fiction movies.

Most scientists, including a panel of the National Academy of Sciences, believe food products from clones would be safe, and studies have shown that it can't be distinguished from normal food. The Food and Drug Administration is reviewing the issue and has said it is likely to approve milk from clones and meat from their offspring.

Livestock breeders and a handful of cloning companies are pushing the technology, but environmental and some food-safety groups oppose it. Food processors are caught in the middle, convinced that the scientific research is sound but worried about a kerfuffle once clone burgers go on sale at the supermarket.

To have a backlash, "you need fuel and you need a spark," said Doug Usher, a vice president at the Mellman Group Inc., which conducted the poll on behalf of the Pew Initiative. "What this poll says is that when it comes to cloning, there is fuel for a backlash. That doesn't mean there's going to be one."

The Pew Initiative is a Washington organization set up with foundation money to provide a forum for discussing controversial issues related to biotechnology and the food supply. The group is deliberately neutral. The poll released yesterday, of 1,000 adults interviewed by telephone Oct. 10-16, is one of the largest to date to ask questions about cloning and food.

Asked whether they feel "comfortable or uncomfortable with animal cloning," 66 percent of respondents said they were uncomfortable or strongly uncomfortable, while 24 percent said they were comfortable or strongly comfortable. Also, 43 percent felt that food from clones would be unsafe, with 28 percent feeling strongly about that. More than a third, 34 percent, had no opinion on the safety question.

In another recent poll, paid for by ViaGen Inc., a Texas cloning company, people were told that the FDA was likely to declare cloned food safe, then asked whether they'd buy it. With the question worded that way, 29 percent of respondents said they would; 34 percent said they would consider buying the food after they found out more; and 35 percent, the largest group, said they would "never buy" such food.

Mark David Richards, a senior vice president at KRC Research who designed the industry poll, said the results of the two surveys were roughly consistent. "You get that middle third that basically could go one way or the other depending on what they hear," Richards said.

The pollsters agreed that their work doesn't necessarily predict how people might behave once the food is on grocery shelves. Polls show that half the public opposes genetic modification of plant crops, for instance, without realizing such crops have been on the market for a decade and most packaged foods contain them. Gene-altered foods aren't labeled, and the FDA has no plans to require labeling of cloned food, either.

"If it does get out there with no serious safety problems, unlabeled, people will eat it," said Usher, the pollster. "As long as they don't think they're eating it, they'll be fine."



Elvis the cloned calf lives at a farm owned by ViaGen Inc. ViaGen commissioned a poll recently that found that 63 percent of consumers would buy or would consider buying food from cloned animals.

