

Food from Cloned Animals

A Bait and Switch?

by **Osagie K. Obasogie** and **Pete Shanks**, [San Francisco Chronicle](#)
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Californians should be allowed to know what they're eating. That's the simple reason why Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger should sign SB63, the nation's first law requiring food from cloned animals to be labeled. But there are other reasons to go slow on this unproven technology, some of which have not received the attention they deserve.

Meat and milk from cloned animals are not yet available. But the Food and Drug Administration is about to allow them into America's food chain, contrary to both scientific evidence and public sentiment. The FDA issued a draft risk assessment in December 2006 that suggested food from cloned animals presents no serious safety issues. But this was discredited by a March 2007 report by the Center for Food Safety that exposed embarrassing inadequacies in the FDA's review; there are no peer-reviewed safety studies on meat from cloned cows, pigs or goats and only three inconclusive ones on milk. Even the National Academies of Science - the government's science adviser - has said that it's just not possible to adequately assess this foods' safety.

People find food from cloned animals rather unappetizing. A December 2006 Pew poll showed that nearly half of all people think it's unsafe while another 36 percent are unsure. Not surprisingly, the FDA received well over 100,000 public comments that were overwhelmingly opposed to their rosy-eyed assessment.

What's more, food from cloned animals is probably not even commercially viable. Cloning is expensive and unreliable; according to a recent survey, the livestock industry views its commercial prospects as "low" or "medium to low."

So, how did we get to the point where California needs a law to protect its food supply from the federal agency charged with ensuring food safety?

The push for producing food from cloned farm animals comes largely from one small sector of the biotech industry, not from meat and dairy producers. Two companies - Cyagra and ViaGen - provided data that fills more than a quarter of the FDA's 678-page report. These companies are not impartial experts; they are for-profits with a stake in the FDA's approval. And their track record is less than stellar. Cyagra is a spin-off from Advanced Cell Technology, a struggling biotech company that is infamous for science-by-press-release: causing a splash by exaggerating claims and hoping rebuttals get less attention. ViaGen is part of the Exeter Life Science Group owned by billionaire John Sperling, who also founded the now defunct pet-cloning operation Genetic Savings and Clone.

These companies' narrow economic interests are obvious. But why is the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) - the industry's lobbying arm- supporting them when the vast majority of its members will not directly benefit? This partly comes from their central creed: science is a commodity to be sold without restrictions. Even when BIO agrees that some limits are appropriate - such as disallowing human reproductive cloning - they advocate self-regulation over public oversight.

Perhaps less obvious is the full extent of the industry's push to genetically manipulate living organisms. Agribusiness has adopted genetically modified crops, and worked hard to suppress attempts at labeling these unpopular products. But food isn't the only thing on the agenda. For instance, more than 20 percent of human genes are privately owned through patents, affecting such things as when and at what cost women can find out if they have a genetic predisposition to breast cancer. Such patents have drawn much criticism, but the industry seems determined to push forward.

What's happening here is that food from cloned animals might pave the road for a bait and switch: the more cloned products that reach the market, the more likely it is that the public will accept other questionable biotech applications aimed literally right at them. And that is a road that could lead in directions most people reject, such as designer babies with genetically tailored attributes. If cloning became as much a part of daily life as the meat we eat and the milk we pour in our coffee, wouldn't it become easier to imagine applying similar technologies to enhance ourselves?

The bill that is on the governor's desk does not ban milk or meat from cloned livestock; all it stipulates is that these products have labels. That's more than reasonable. SB63 is a small step in the right direction and might help slow this issue long enough for the country to have the thorough debate it needs. The public interest demands a far deeper assessment of these technologies' impacts, both in themselves and in their future implications.

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