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Food From Cloned Animals Seems Safe, a Panel Finds

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

Meat and milk from cloned animals seem to pose no special health risks, said a draft report released Friday by the European [Food Safety](#) Agency. It was a first step toward the eventual sale of such products within the [European Union](#).

“It is very unlikely that any difference exists in terms of food safety between food products originating from clones and their progeny compared with those derived from conventionally bred animals,” the report said.

It acknowledged that cloned animals were prone to more diseases than conventionally bred animals, but it added that humans would not suffer because unhealthy clones would be excluded from the food chain as is the case with conventionally bred animals.

The decision prompted an immediate outcry from environmental groups, which already were at odds with the agency over its conclusion that there was “no evidence” that genetically modified crops posed a health or environmental risk.

Helen Holder of Friends of the Earth International, an environmental group, said from Brussels that Friday’s decision was “weak and unsatisfactory.” She continued: “They clearly acknowledge that these animals have more diseases and that there is only limited data about the environmental impact. And then they go on to conclude that meat and products from cloned animal products are O.K. for Europeans to eat. It makes no sense.”

The European Food Safety Agency is a scientific body that advises the [European Commission](#), which asked for its opinion on cloned animal products early in 2007. Its ruling is not binding and does not take into account the ethical aspects of cloning, which will be reviewed separately by the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, an advisory panel.

The decision also does not take into account European public opinion, which strongly favors natural foods. “So now we feed our animals with genetically

modified plants. And the animals will be clones,” Ms. Holder said. The European public “doesn’t want these things.”

Based on the expert panels’ opinions, the European Commission will decide whether to allow the sale of such products on the Continent. But under international trade law, it is difficult for the commission to exclude unpopular products that its scientific advisers say are safe.

Last year, the [World Trade Organization](#) concluded that European efforts to ban genetically modified crops constituted an unfair trade barrier. The commission is under threat of penalties if member states do not open their markets to such products. Many areas, including large parts of Greece, Italy and Austria, have refused.

Friday’s decision was particularly important because the United States [Food and Drug Administration](#) is also expected to rule this month on the safety of products from cloned animals. It, too, is expected to conclude that the products are safe. That could allow commercial production of such products to move forward. There is currently a moratorium, although a fledgling agricultural cloning industry in the United States is waiting for a green light.

The possibility that meat and dairy products from cloned animals could soon arrive on Europe’s doorstep prompted the European Commission to action.

“As the technology has developed, so does the possibility that such products will come on the market, which is why E.F.S.A.’s scientific advice on the matter is important,” said Karen Talbot, a spokeswoman for the agency, which is based in Parma, Italy.

While cloning animals is still a young and inefficient technology, scientists expect it will improve greatly in the coming years. Using the process, the genes from an animal with desirable characteristics are inserted into an unfertilized egg. The egg can then grow into an exact duplicate of the “parent” animal.

In theory, the procedure can produce meatier cows or pigs that are better able to resist diseases.

In practice, the process produces a relatively high proportion of deformed animals that cannot survive, although scientists with the European Food Safety Agency said such rates were likely to decline as the technology improved.