Clones in Canada
Why consumers might want to move to the EU

By Trevor D'Arcy

"The clones are coming, dead or alive," was Yves Tiberghien's blunt prediction regarding clones in Canada. Tiberghien is a UBC political science professor who specializes in the governance of GM foods.

"What happened with GMOs is the same argument, the only way is for Canada to approve [cloned meat and dairy]," he said.

His comments came after the US gave the green light for cloned meat and dairy products two weeks ago. After a five year scientific assessment, the American Food and Drug Association (FDA) found that cloned meat and dairy products from cattle, swine and goats were safe for human consumption.

This was just days after the European Union's own food regulatory body, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), drafted a similar conclusion.

The FDA also declared that labelling cloned meat and dairy would be unnecessary since they are "no different" from their natural counterparts. According to Tiberghien, this guarantees that cloned meat and dairy will eventually reach Canadian shelves, regardless of Canada's policy.

"As far as I know there is no tool, once you don't track it in the US meat supply, with the free trade [through] NAFTA there is no tool to stop it," he said, referring to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Any meat and dairy crossing the border is first inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). According to Marc Richard, a media relations officer, unlabelled clone meat, at least for retail markets, does not present a problem for border inspections.

"There have been long standing controls on trade of meat, for 80 plus years, and the US would be required to certify that Canadian standards are met when they ship meat here," he said.

Canada's response

Despite the implications for Canada, the FDA's announcement produced remarkably little effect.

Health Canada simply stated that cloned foods are not yet approved for Canadian consumption, but as Tiberghien suggested, they are more than likely going to change their stance.

"We're going to be doing our own risk assessment in Canada," said Paul Duchesne of Health Canada. "We first have to do work on assessing all of the available science."

The assessment will be independent, but it will follow the same scientific protocol as used by the FDA. That is the rule of substantial equivalence.

Substantial equivalence assesses the safety of modified or new food products by comparing them to an equivalent, existing food product. Similarities and differences between each are identified and similarities are accepted while differences are further investigated. It is a widely used, but limited approach to assessing novel food products such as cloned or GM foods.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development described substantial equivalence as "the most practical way to address the issue of food safety at this time. This is not to imply, however, that the report is applicable to any other aspect of biotechnology safety, including environmental safety."

This is bad news for Canadian consumers who may take issue with cloning.

Canadian approval of cloned meat and dairy rests on a strictly scientific health assessment, while Issues of ethics, environmental threats and religion are left unaddressed.

This is not the case across the Atlantic.

As with GMOs, the Europe Union is taking a much more involved and complex assessment. While the process delays industry and complicates issues of trade, it takes consumers and long term effects into consideration.

Europe's precautionary principal

Where the US and Canada rely heavily on the rule of substantial equivalence, the European Union, may invoke the precautionary principal.

Put succinctly, the precautionary principal states that if an action or policy might cause severe or irremediable harm to public health, or the environment, in the absence of a scientific consensus that harm would not ensue, the burden of proof falls on those who would advocate taking the action rather than the public.

Tiberghien framed it with respect to the novel foods debate.

“This is a big question here; it’s a major change in the production of food. First there are big social, ethical questions that people should know about, discuss it, the second, there could be all sorts of long term interactive processes and we don’t know how those things will work. Give it more time, don’t go so fast,” he said.

When the European Commission requested their watchdog, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to provide a scientific opinion, they asked not only for an assessment of food safety, but also of animal health, animal welfare and environmental implications of cloned animals.

The EFSA’s draft cloned products safe for consumption; they also noted that death and disease rates were significantly higher in clones than in naturally equivalent animals.

Environmental assessments foresaw no negative impacts, but conceded that relevant data is limited.

The European Commission also looked beyond the realm of science. Unlike in North America, they asked for an ethical review of cloning. For this they went to the European Group of Ethics in science and new technologies (EGE), and their report, which was released shortly after the EFSA’s draft, had a very sceptical tone.

“The EGE has doubts as to whether cloning animals for food supply is ethically justified,” they stated in a press release. “At present, the EGE does not see convincing arguments to justify the production of food from clones and their offspring.”

Their report included recommendations to the Commission suggesting they consider the rights of consumers by allowing public debate, labeling cloned products and tracing cloned animals. They suggested that these principals also be maintained when importing cloned animal products.

The Commission’s response: further consultation.

“The Commission will examine in detail the Opinions of these two independent bodies. Upon completion of this examination, the Commission will launch a wide consultation to obtain stakeholders' feedback,” read a press statement.

Science versus Politics

The EU’s process in assessing novel food products may seem long and tedious, but in the end, they will have invested more in consumer rights and in the confidence of their citizens.

Their approach is best exemplified by Sweden.

Last week, the Swedish agriculture ministry was the first European country to announce total opposition to cloned animal products.

“We don’t think the consumer wants to eat this food stuff, there is no demand for it. We’re afraid that if you just allow it then there will be a great deal of mistrust from the consumer against the food,” said Sofia Carlsson, a political advisory for the ministry. “We share the scientific results, we think its safe, but we’re more concerned about the consumer, about the ethical issues.”