

UN commission lifts 10-kGy maximum dose

A UNITED NATIONS commission has eased its standard on maximum radiation levels for treating food. During its 26th session, which closed on July 7, the Codex Alimentarius Commission lifted its 10-kilogray maximum radiation dose for food products. The commission was created in 1963 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to develop food standards and guidelines.

The revised standard maintains a maximum absorbed dose of 10 kGy, but allows exceptions to this limit when necessary to achieve a legitimate technological purpose, provided that it does not compromise consumer safety or wholesomeness of food, FAO said. This decision was taken in part on the basis of a WHO evaluation and several joint FAO–WHO–International Atomic Energy Agency expert group conclusions that irradiated foods are safe and nutritionally adequate. The Codex Alimentarius Commission said it determined that allowing higher levels of irradiation would eliminate bacterial spores and the radiation-resistant pathogenic bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*.

“This is a really important breakthrough,”

Isotopes and Radiation Briefs

NUCLEAR POWER MAY HAVE THE LEAST IMPACT ON HEALTH, a French study has found, compared to fossil fuels and even renewable sources like wind, photovoltaic cells, and biomass. “Nuclear generating stations appear to have the lesser impact on health per kWh [kilowatt-hour] produced,” the French National Academy of Medicine said in a report released on July 1. The academy also said there is no scientific justification to estimate the health consequences of low levels of radiation using the linear, no-threshold model. The recommendations resulted from a colloquium held in late June on the relationship between energy choices and public health. The academy said it also plans, in “due course,” to make recommendations on the management of high-level nuclear waste.

said Alan Randell, secretary of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. “For the consumer it means a potential for higher levels of food safety because of the protection offered by food irradiation. For example, it can be applied to spices, which can carry bacteria resistant to other treatments. Irradiated foods are proven safe and do not contain any radioactive traces.”

■ *Consumer Reports* magazine questioned the value of food irradiation in its August issue. While acknowledging that bacteria levels in uncooked foods that had been ir-

radiated were much lower, the report noted that those foods still harbor bacteria. “Should you buy it? There’s no reason if you cook meat thoroughly. Irradiation actually destroys fewer bacteria than does proper cooking,” the report reads. It also said that trained taste testers detected a “slight but distinct off-taste and smell” in most of the cooked irradiated beef and chicken. “In the beef, the taste was detectable even with a bun, ketchup, and lettuce. Because it was usually subtle, however, some consumers may not notice it.” ■