

Group revives plant for meat irradiation

It's taken a long time against the ignorance of protesters but ...

Billings Gazette

January 8, 2006

An investment team headed by a Texas man is reviving technology known as Surebeam at a plant in Sioux City, Iowa. The team believes there is a growing market for using electron beams to kill bacteria in ground beef and other products.

"We want this to become the 'Intel Inside' of food products," said David Corbin, chairman of the Sadex Corp.

Corbin, of Fort Worth, Texas, and 12 other Sadex shareholders have been licensed to use the Surebeam technology by Titan Corp., which developed the electronic pasteurization method of killing E. coli, salmonella and other food-borne pathogens. The Sadex group also bought the equipment for an undisclosed price.

Titan, now part of L-3 Communications group, had spun off the technology into a company called Surebeam Corp. of San Diego, Calif., which opened the plant in 2000 and raised \$67 million in an initial public offering in March 2001.

Surebeam went bankrupt in January 2004, however. Sadex reopened Surebeam's Sioux City plant in June.

Corbin, who also had invested in the Surebeam company, said Surebeam officials made some mistakes, including spending too much money on marketing and trying to attract a wide range of meat processing companies.

Corbin said his company plans to concentrate on producers of premium products, such as Omaha Steaks of Omaha. Irradiated meats also will appear on some grocery shelves in the coming weeks, Corbin said.

Irradiation of meat received a lot of attention when it first was introduced, but attention has waned, Corbin said.

"The biggest thing that made it disappear was Surebeam went bankrupt. A large number of producers in the Midwest used Sioux City to get their products irradiated."

Omaha Steaks used Surebeam for its ground beef products, but switched to Food Technology Service Inc. of Mulberry, Fla., when Surebeam went bankrupt.

"Omaha Steaks has always felt strongly that irradiation of all our ground beef products was an added level of food safety that we wanted to provide our customers," spokeswoman Beth Weiss said in an e-mail.

Florida obviously is farther away than Sioux City, but the arrangement has worked well and Omaha Steaks currently plans to stay with Food Technology, Weiss said.

Irradiated items such as sterilized medical equipment have been around for more than 30 years, and since the 1960s food products such as wheat and potatoes have had various federal approval dates for irradiation.

The process, which also can extend shelf life, was approved in 1986 for pork, spices, fruits and vegetables. Poultry received full approval for irradiation in 1992.

Irradiated beef has been on supermarket shelves since 2000. And the U.S. Department of Agriculture began offering irradiated beef in national school lunch and other federal food programs in 2004.

Some critics of irradiated foods have worried about potential long-term health effects. In addition, proper cooking is adequate to kill food-borne pathogens.

The USDA and the Food and Drug Administration, however, have deemed irradiated food safe. Advocates argue the technology is one more step toward food safety.

All irradiated foods must be properly labeled. Products treated in Sioux City will receive a Sadex or a Surebeam logo, depending on what clients want to use.

Dennis Burson, an extension meat specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said irradiation is effective, but meat safety has

improved in the last few years simply through better processing at meatpacking plants.

Surebeam may have faltered its first time out in part because people had trouble accepting irradiated meat, Burson said. Concerns could have included generally higher prices for the treated meat, worries about whether irradiation hurts product quality and "concerns consumers might have about an irradiated product, even though it's used a lot more than people might imagine," he said.

Direct marketers such as Omaha Steaks might use irradiation as an extra measure of safety, but such meat may not be widely accepted by shoppers any time soon, Burson said.

Corbin said the irradiation process at his plant could add 6 cents to 12 cents per pound to the cost of ground beef.

"You're going to pay a little bit more," Corbin said. "So the consumer has to decide if it is worth 6 cents to 12 cents more for me to feed my family the safest, highest quality product that is out there."

Harlan Clemmons, vice president and general manager of Sadex, said some people might hesitate to buy irradiated meat, but his company expects wider acceptance as the process becomes more common.

Pasteurization of milk encountered similar, early skepticism, he said.

"Now it is a readily accepted thing to do to milk, just because it makes milk safer," Clemmons said.

In its irradiation process, Sadex passes meat, fruits, vegetables, cosmetics, spices, pet foods, veterinarian supplies and other products under an electron beam to kill harmful bacteria.

Many medical device manufacturers run their own irradiation facilities. Other companies in the irradiation business include Steris Corp. of Mentor, Ohio, and Sterigenics International of Oak Brook, Ill.

Cliff Albertson, general manager and chief operating officer of Huisken Meats in Sauk Rapids, Minn., said his company was the first in the country to irradiate ground beef – on May 16, 2000 – and it used Surebeam.

When Surebeam went out of business, Huisken Meats turned to Texas A&M for its irradiation services, Albertson said.

Huisken Meats currently is considering whether to use Sadex Corp. in Sioux City, Albertson said.