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Cloned meat, dairy make way to the table

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by John Upton, The Examiner

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(AP file photo)
State Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, pushed through a measure that would've required companies selling cloned meat and dairy to label products as such. The governor vetoed the bill.

SAN FRANCISCO (Map, News) - Families and friends who share eggnog, lamb curry or beef stew this winter may not know whether the main ingredients came from cloned animals, after the governor vetoed a San Francisco lawmaker's labeling bill.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is poised to end a voluntary moratorium on the sale of dairy and meat from cloned cattle, goats, pigs and sheep, after it ruled last year that the food is safe for humans. The agency published a health risk assessment in December that noted high death rates among cloned animals and host mothers, partly because of incidents of 'large animal syndrome' in cloned cattle and sheep.

A federal bill to require labels on food from cloned animals and their descendents has been stalled in Democratic-controlled congressional committees since February. A similar bill by state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, passed the Legislature last month, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently refused to sign it.

To clone an animal, scientists move its genetic material into excavated donor embryos, which are planted in host mothers to grow as genetic doppelgängers of the prized beast. A Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology survey last year found that two-thirds of Americans are "uncomfortable" with the technology.

Migden said labels on cloned food would let consumers know and choose what they put on the dinner table, but Schwarzenegger told lawmakers in a veto statement that Migden's proposed rules "could be unworkable, costly and unenforceable," and might violate federal law.

About a dozen agricultural and retail groups opposed Migden's bill. California Farm Bureau lobbyist Noelle Cremers said cloning lets livestock producers "more quickly respond to consumer demand" by replicating valued animals, and that it would be "next to impossible" to segregate food, for labeling purposes, from cloned animals and their descendents.

Labels for cloned food would mislead consumers, which would violate federal law, said Cremers, because there's "absolutely no difference" between food from cloned and non-cloned animals.

But food-safety and animal-welfare groups criticized Schwarzenegger's decision. "The animals are injected with large amounts of hormones — and that's a food safety issue," said Rebecca Spector, the San Francisco-based West Coast director of The Center for Food Safety.

The nonprofit noted in a report that the federal government's risk assessment relied heavily on studies that weren't reviewed by other scientists. "We feel very strongly," Spector said, "that there hasn't been adequate testing."

UC Davis biotechnologist Alison Van Eenennaam said overgrown young are a side effect of in vitro fertilization, and that they're usually delivered safely by Caesarean section. "Most of these companies have got a few vets on staff," she said. "It's not like it's Joe Blow out in the field hoping for the best."

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