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Sci Tech

THE BATTALION

Tuesday, March 26,

Making foods friendlie New technology kills food pathogens

By Jesse Stephenson THE BATTALION

A process ensuring safer food for consumers will soon be implemented at a new Texas A&M facility. Food irradiation, a process by which harmful pathogens are eliminated from common foods, will be used at the Electron Beam Food Research Facility. However, consumer activists are wary of the new technology.

"Food irradiation is a technique in which we actually inactivate and kill microorganisms," said Dr. Mark R. McLellan, director and professor in the Institute of Food Science and Engineering. An electron beam that passes through the food kills the microorganisms, he said.

"It actually breaks the DNA of that microorganism so that it cannot grow.

Food irradiation has been approved for many common foods. Beef, poultry, fruits, vegetables, potatoes, onions and spices are all eligible for the process. Two groups that have not yet been approved for irradiation are seafood and fullyprocessed products.

Pathogens that can be eliminated through irradiation include E. coli, Salmonella and anthrax.

The process of food irradiation has not gained universal support. Skeptics, comprised mostly of various consumer activist groups, are afraid that there may be hidden dangers. These fears are unfounded, McLellan said.

"It is not dangerous," he said. "It is probably singularly one of the most studied technologies for use prior to implementation. The World Health Organization has explored the technology in depth, and they have agreed it is not dangerous.

In fact, the organization recommended that the process should be widely used.

While activists may not be convinced, shoppers have approved of irradiated foods.

'All test markets of food irradiated products have been extraordinarily positive," McLellan said. In one study, in which irradiated and nonirradiated strawberries were arranged side side in a supermarket, the irradiated berries out. Once the process was explained to tomers, they had no problems purchasing

Though food irradiation is a huge stride food science, McLellan stressed that it is m cure-all pill.

"This is not a silver bullet," he said. "This one of our tools amongst many.

Even the simple process of freezing foods

seem risky compared to irradiation. The chemical changes in a frozen pro are far more dramatic, far more extensive, you would see in an irradiated prod

McLellan said. Although the electron beams are not in the facility will soon be fully operational.

'We just had the grand opening March 4, that was really to celebrate a high degree completion," McLellan said. The facility is going through its final phase

electronics installation. Texas A&M has formed a partnership SureBeam Corporation to construct the faci SureBeam is not a food processor, but man turers of the system.

"They actually produce the electron by system and they will install it the

Possible bioterrorist threat

ATLANTA (AP) — Hundreds of health officials descended on Atlanta this week for an annual conference on emerging infectious diseases and were warned that terrorists might try to spread deadly germs through the food supply.

Terrorists could try to make the biological attack even more dangerous by taking down critical communications systems, according to experts from the Centers for Disease Control and

"The national system was overwhelmed" by the anthrax scare last fall, said Dr. James Hughes, chief of infectious diseases at the Atlanta-based CDC. "Clearly we learned that we were not adequately prepared. This was a small attack.

The conference agenda, usually filled with sessions on obscure diseases and small outbreaks, is dominated this year by info tion on anthrax and smallpo considered among the most da gerous terrorist agents.

The anthrax-by-mail attac killed five people last fall sickened 13 others. The CDCs earlier this month that a laboratory worker hand anthrax specimens becar infected with the bacteria and is recovering.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Vioxx linked to meningitis cases

CHICAGO (AP) - The popul lar painkiller Vioxx has been linked to five cases of a non bacterial type of meningitis possible side effect that although rare, is serious, the Food and Drug

Administration reports. The cases are among seven reported to the FDA from Ma 1999 — when it approved Viol for arthritis and other acul pain — through February 200 according to the report Monday's Archives of Interna Medicine.

Some 52 million Vioxx pr scriptions have been written the United States since June 1999, a spokesperson Merck & Co. said.

All seven patients were tal ing Vioxx when they developed meningitis, but two case lacked enough information to determine possible causes the report said.

Since February 2001, men gitis also has been reported five other Vioxx patients, sal Renan Bonnel of the FDA.

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