

## Company asks to sell cloned meat

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OTTAWA-- A livestock company has asked Health Canada whether it can sell meat from cloned animals for human consumption.

Karen McIntyre, acting director for Health Canada's Bureau of Food Policy Integration, said the department began considering the request several months ago.

"A company has come to us and said: 'We want to do this,'" she said.

McIntyre said she could not reveal the name of the company or even the type of cloned meat it hopes to market.

No formal application to sell the meat in Canada has been made yet, but McIntyre said a government committee, with experts from the departments of Health, Environment, Agriculture, and Fisheries, has been set up to study the question of cloned foods.

"For us, it's related to health and safety. What are the risks associated with cloned animals?" she said. "That's what we're exploring right now."

Two livestock companies in the United States -- Prolinia in Athens, Ga., and Cyagra in Worcester, Mass. -- are already working on cloning pigs and cattle.

At its most extreme, the promise of cloned livestock is to create the ultimate in factory farming. Instead of having a herd of cattle with offspring of various shapes and sizes, the farmer could pick the meatiest adult animal, have it cloned, impregnate all of the cows with the same clone, and end up with a herd of identical calves yielding identical cuts of meat.

The problem is that current techniques are imperfect: cloning is much more expensive than conventional breeding, and there is a higher rate of birth defects, miscarriages and calf deaths. As well, the lack of genetic diversity could quickly make the herd not viable.

Another possibility, more likely in the short term, is that companies will clone a few prize bulls and then use the cloned bulls to impregnate cows by conventional means. In this scenario, consumers would be eating the offspring of clones, but not the clones themselves.

Or, a company could clone a prize bull to breed dairy cows, and consumers could find themselves drinking the milk of those cows. The Wisconsin-based Infigen Inc. is already breeding a herd of such cows.

No products of cloned animals or their descendants are currently on the market in Canada or the United States. The American Food and Drug Administration is also examining the question of cloned meat, and expects to publish its opinion later this month.

"At present, the position we're for the most part taking is that we need to err on the side of caution," said Dave Trus, a geneticist at Agriculture Canada who sits on the interdepartmental committee.

Even if a cloned animal is healthy and appears the same as any other animal, there could be undetected changes inside its cells, said Francois Pothier, a professor in the department of animal sciences at Laval University in Quebec City.

In cloning, the genetic material of an adult cell is injected into an egg cell whose own genetic material has been removed, he explained. In order to create a baby clone, the egg cell must "turn back" the biological clock of the adult cell to zero. During that process, genetic errors can be made. It is possible, for example, that the cloned animal's cells could overproduce a certain protein, which may not be harmful to the animal but could have harmful consequences on humans.

He said tests exist to determine the chemical composition of meat, which should tell regulators whether the meat from the cloned animal is identical to that of the original animal.

But as Health Canada prepares for the day when it will have to decide whether to approve cloned food for human consumption, the department's past record in dealing with genetically novel foods does not inspire confidence, said Brian Ellis, associate director of the biotechnology laboratory at the University of British Columbia, and co-chairman of the Royal Society of Canada's expert panel on the future of food biotechnology.

"We have real concerns about the extent of testing that is being done on these products of biotechnology," he said.

McIntyre said Health Canada scientists perform a "comprehensive review" before they approve any new food product. Department spokesman Ryan Baker added that the public will have input before any new regulations are developed regarding cloned meat.

Ellis said that cloned meat may be safer to eat than genetically modified foods because scientists do not directly tamper with the genes. But he said consumers still have a right to be critical, because Health Canada's approval process is not sufficiently rigorous or open to public scrutiny.

"A big issue from my point of view is the erosion of public confidence, because of the lack of transparency," he said.

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