Clones on the range

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Eating, like sex, is both an act and an idea. It satisfies a physical need but also an emotional urge (think comfort food).

That explains the furor unleashed last week by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. It ruled that meat and milk from cloned animals and their offspring is as safe to eat as that from conventionally bred animals.

Scientific evidence suggests that's the right decision. But the immediate outcry was deafening. Food advocacy groups decried the decision. Within hours, the U.S. Department of Agriculture had called on producers to keep products from cloned animals, but not their offspring, off the market - at least for now.

Human beings have been intervening to shape the production of crops and animals for the last 3,000 years. Cloning is just the latest method. Ranchers and dairy farmers long have used artificial insemination in breeding their animals. Today, they routinely use in vitro fertilization and embryo-transfer technology to breed more productive or hardier cows.

But the 1997 birth of Dolly the sheep, the first cloned animal, raised both ethical and food-safety concerns. The ethical issues remain a source of contention, but the safety questions seem to have been adequately addressed by scientists in both the United States and Europe.

Not only is there no difference between products from cloned and uncloned animals, researchers here and in Europe have said, but it also is not scientifically possible to tell them apart. That raises the possibility (some have said the probability) that the offspring of clones already have entered the food chain somewhere.

But probably not cloned animals themselves. For one thing, they're too expensive - an estimated $15,000 to $20,000 each, far more than they would fetch if sold for food. Animals created through cloning probably would not be cloned themselves, but would be bred using conventional techniques.

Even so, the food industry wants to wait before introducing food derived from clones. Producers plan to "educate" the public about cloning and safety. As the experience of St. Louis-based Monsanto Co. demonstrates, that could be a long, long process.

In 1993, the FDA gave Monsanto approval to sell a hormone that increases milk production in dairy cattle. Since then, millions of people routinely have consumed milk from cows given the hormone, called rBST, with

absolutely no problems. But Monsanto still is fighting for consumer acceptance.

Coffee giant Starbucks and several major grocery chains have said they'll stop selling milk from cows given the hormone. And just last week, Pennsylvania's Agriculture Department abandoned new labeling requirements that would have prohibited dairies from advertising their milk as hormone-free.

Science clearly is a powerful tool. But it's not quite as powerful as the idea of pure food.

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