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[Skip to content.](#) | [Skip to navigation](#) | [Site Map](#)

- [Accessibility](#)
- [Contact](#)

[Search Site](#)

[Food & Water Watch](#)

Sections

- [About](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Water](#)
- [Fish](#)
- [World](#)
- [Press](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Take Action](#)
- [Support Us](#)

[Personal](#)

[tools](#) | [Join](#)

You are here: [Home](#) → [Food](#) → [Irradiation](#) → [U.S. Food Irradiation](#) → [Proposed Hawaii Facility](#) → Aloha Disaster: Hawaii and Food Irradiation



Aloha Disaster: Hawaii and Food Irradiation

by [Webeditor](#) — last modified 2007-01-29 14:33

Safety

Hazards from the Irradiation Plants

Food irradiation facilities threaten environmental and worker safety. In the case of cobalt-60, the material that would be used in the planned Oahu facility, there is risk from both the transport of the radioactive material to the facility and from the presence of radioactive material at the site itself. Cobalt-60 is a dangerous material because it emits gamma radiation that can cause cancer.

Since the 1960's there have been dozens of accidents at irradiation facilities worldwide, some of which are cleaned-up with taxpayer money. Radioactive water has been flushed into the public sewer system; radioactive waste has been thrown into the garbage; facilities have caught fire; equipment has malfunctioned. Workers have lost fingers, hands, legs and, in several cases, their lives. Company executives have been charged with cover-ups and even sentenced to federal prison.

An Accident in Honolulu

In 1979, decontamination began at the Hawaiian Developmental Irradiator at Fort Armstrong where, years earlier, radioactive water leaked onto the roof and lawn. As part of the \$500,000, taxpayer-subsidized clean-up, nearly 50 tons of steel, 250 cubic feet of concrete and 1,100 cubic feet of soil were removed and taken to a nuclear waste dump in Washington, one of the most polluted places on Earth. The plant was shut down in 1980 and the remaining cobalt-60 was shipped to the University of Hawaii, where it was used at their research facility.

The Threat of Terrorism

Many security experts are concerned that terrorists could construct a “dirty bomb” using radioactive material from irradiation facilities. The Federation of American Scientists modeled the detonation of a foot-long rod of Cobalt obtained from a food irradiation plant, and found that it would contaminate 1000 square kilometers, with a 10% risk of death from cancer for residents living inside a 300 city block area for 40 years following the detonation.



After the University of Hawaii shut down their irradiation facility in 2005, a deputy director from the National Nuclear Security Administration remarked in the Honolulu Advertiser “The University of Hawai’i, its surrounding neighbors and the international community are safer today as a result of this effort.” Further, “[t]he removal of these radiological sources [cobalt-60] has greatly reduced the chance that radiological materials could get into the wrong hands.” The proposed Honolulu facility is especially alarming because it would be located next to an international airport, a site already subject to increased concern about security.

Recognizing these risks, EarthJustice Hawaii, on behalf of Concerned Citizens of Honolulu, successfully petitioned the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to perform a draft environmental assessment of the facility. Unfortunately, the NRC’s findings largely ignored the risks

presented by the proposed Pa’ina plant.

To start, the NRC seemed to rely almost exclusively on data provided by the operator of the facility. No independent research or comprehensive modeling used to assess the damage the facility could sustain from a catastrophic event at this particular site. One of the source documents cited by the NRC was a 2003 report it conducted of an irradiator in Pennsylvania, ignoring the fact that Hawaii’s seismic and meteorological conditions make a Pennsylvania facility a poor comparison.

The NRC also failed to conduct an in-depth assessment of the impact of an airplane crash into the facility, whether accidental or intentional. Instead, the NRC breezily dismissed those concerns with a cursory analysis.

Worst of all, potential security concerns were not addressed at all, despite the danger of terrorism.

A Failing Technology

Food irradiation Facilities - Shuttered or Struggling

Throughout the United States, food irradiation companies have faltered financially. In the 1990’s, Dole Plantation opened an irradiation facility in Hawaii to treat produce, but then shut it down. And the University of Hawaii shut down their food irradiation facility in 2005, citing security concerns and the potential for a “dirty bomb.”

Other irradiation facilities, including those of bankrupt irradiation company Surebeam, have closed their doors recently. And after just a year and a half of operation, a food irradiation facility operated by CFC Logistics, which used cobalt-60, shut down its operation in Pennsylvania, citing low demand. CFC Logistics had been met with significant opposition from local residents who were concerned about safety issues, and opposed to irradiated food.

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- o [Proposed Hawaii Facility](#)
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- o [Zapped](#)
- o [School Milk](#)
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Hawaii Pride, an electron-beam facility (which uses electricity instead of radioactive cobalt) in Hilo, opened in 2000 to irradiate produce for export. Many residents and local environmental groups opposed Hawaii Pride's construction. Hawaii Pride claimed to have sold \$2 million worth of produce such as rambutan, longan, lychee, and mango in 2003. However, in 2004, the federal government described the Hawaii Pride irradiation facility as "sometimes underutilized."



The food irradiation facilities that remain in the U.S. are often financially propped up by parent companies. For instance, in 2003, Hawaii Pride's parent company Titan announced that they would make loan payments for the facility because Hawaii Pride could not. And many other facilities rely on irradiating non-food products like medical equipment to stay in business.

Irradiated Produce in the United States – A Weak Market

Irradiated fruit in the U.S. has had a very minimal presence in grocery stores. Relative to irradiated meat in supermarkets, which itself has struggled commercially, irradiated produce is rarely available domestically. Harris Teeter, a high-end grocery store that operates in the southeast, once carried irradiated papayas, but stopped in 2004. Other stores may carry irradiated produce, but our research indicates that there is low availability and lower demand. Many consumers reject irradiated food because of health concerns about irradiation.

Health Concerns

Recent studies have shown that food irradiation creates unique chemicals in food called 2-ACBs, which may promote tumor growth and cause cellular and genetic damage. Food irradiation also depletes vitamins and nutrients in food. Because irradiated food sold in grocery stores must be labeled, many consumers choose to avoid it.

What You Can Do

Let the Nuclear Regulatory Commission know that they need to thoroughly assess the environmental risks posed by this facility.

If You Live In Hawaii, Attend the Public Hearing :

Thursday, February 1, 2007.

Informal Open House: 6 p.m.--7 p.m.

NRC Overview Presentation: 7 p.m.--7:30 p.m.

Question and Answer: 7:30 p.m.--8 p.m.

Comment Session: 8 p.m.--9 p.m.

Location: Ala Moana Hotel, 410 Atkinson Drive, Honolulu, Hawaii 96814, Hotel telephone number 808-955-4811.

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