



Energy Program

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A Backgrounder on Food Irradiation Facilities

There are approximately 50 irradiation facilities in the United States, many of which irradiate food, including spices, beef, chicken, fruit and vegetables. The exact number of irradiation facilities is not known, nor is the number of facilities that irradiate food, due to the secretive nature of the industry. Most facilities only irradiate spices, medical supplies and consumer products, while some focus solely on irradiating food.

The number of food irradiation facilities had grown in recent years, but the bankruptcy of leading food irradiator Surebeam has resulted in several plants sitting idle, while poor financial performance by other irradiation companies has caused other facilities to be sold to new owners. And a number of food irradiation facilities are running significantly under capacity, although they are aggressively marketing their products to increase demand and fill the void left by SureBeam's demise.

There are three types of machines which are used to create the ionizing radiation used in irradiation: "gamma-ray" (which uses a radioactive material, usually cobalt 60); X-ray; and "electron beam" (which uses electrons fired from a linear accelerator at nearly the speed of light). Any proposed food irradiation facility that will handle meat must apply for a "grant of inspection" from the USDA. The USDA must inspect the facility and approve it before the facility can begin operation. Because gamma-ray facilities use radioactive material, they require more approvals. In a "non-agreement" state, where the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has authority over radioactive materials and how they are used, the NRC will conduct an additional inspection and give approval for the use of the radioactive material. In "agreement" states, the state government is responsible for ensuring the safety of the facility.

search

Recently there has been significant local opposition to new irradiation facilities. Citizens in Illinois successfully pressured state officials to force a new electron beam facility to apply for an air pollution permit, because of its production of ozone, a component of smog.

For Keyword(s)

Food Irradiation Facilities

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Known to be in operation in the U.S.:

email sign-up

Food Technology Service -- Mulberry, FL (Cobalt-60)

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FTS provides irradiated beef and poultry to numerous stores throughout the South, in particular the grocery chain Publix. Recently, Food Technology Services has been struggling financially, leading to the possibility that the company may be dropped from the NASDAQ stock exchange.

CFC Logistics, Inc. -- Quakertown, PA (Cobalt-60) **CLOSED!**

CFC Logistics was a recent arrival to the food irradiation scene, starting operations in 2004. Within a year and a half of opening, and after months of controversy and opposition by local residents, the facility closed, citing a lack of consumer demand for irradiated food.

Mitec -- Cedar Rapids, IA (E-beam and X-ray)

Mitec Advanced Technologies has started irradiating beef, which it is selling under the brand name "Simek's" to grocery stores in the Midwest.

Sterigenics -- Schaumburg IL (Gamma Ray) and Bridgeport NJ (E-beam)

These plants (and more than 20 others which irradiate non-food products) recently changed hands when they were sold by IBA to Prudential Portfolio Management Ventures and PPM America Capital Partners. The Bridgeport facility is where mail sent to federal government offices in Washington DC goes to be irradiated.

Texas A & M University – College Station, TX (E-beam)

In June 2000, SureBeam announced that it had entered a strategic alliance with Texas A & M University: in exchange for donating \$10 million of irradiation equipment to the university, SureBeam would be given use of a university building for processing and for joint research. This facility opened in 2002, and is still in operation. The center claims to have processed almost 3 million lbs of foods under commercial contracts in 2004.

Iowa State University – Ames, IA (E-beam)

The Iowa State University Department of Animal Science is home to the Linear Accelerator Facility, which serves as an irradiation facility for research programs.

IRRADIATION COMPANIES

Ion Beam Applications/Sterigenics

Ion Beam Applications (IBA) has been one of the leading international irradiation companies for decades; they have made irradiation systems for 40 years and were in the food irradiation business for 15 years. Based in Belgium, IBA has offices in 12 countries. In 2001, IBA announced plans to expand its already extensive nationwide network of irradiation facilities. This announcement came two years after the company acquired two U.S. irradiation companies, **Sterigenics** (which then owned the most irradiation facilities in the U.S.) and Griffith Micro Science (which focused on medical sterilization, food safety and analytical services.)

IBA owned all three types of irradiation facilities: gamma ray, electron beam, and X-ray. The company has about 20 irradiation facilities in the U.S. The three newest plants are an X-ray plant in Edgewood, NY (opened June 2000); a cobalt-60 plant in Schaumburg, IL (opened March 2001); and an X-ray and e-beam plant in Bridgeport, NJ (opened Nov. 2001).

IBA's cobalt-60 facility in Rockaway, NJ, was the site of one of the most notorious mishaps in the history of the irradiation industry. In 1977, a worker was exposed to a near-fatal dose of radiation when a system designed to protect workers from cobalt-60 failed. The plant was owned by a different company at the time. In 1988 – after more than 30 Nuclear Regulatory Commission violations, including one for throwing out radioactive garbage with the trash – the company's president was charged with several federal crimes and sentenced to two years in prison. Many accidents have occurred at other gamma-ray facilities owned by other companies throughout the world, including three fatalities abroad.

In 2004, IBA has sold their irradiation facilities division to another company, transferring ownership to **Prudential Portfolio Management (PPM) Ventures and PPM America Capital Partners**. Demonstrating the financial weakness suffered by many irradiation operations, IBA had significant financial improvement after selling the facilities. Thus, Sterigenics facilities are still operating, but they are now owned by PPM Ventures and PPM America Capital Partners.

STERIS/Isomedix, based in Mentor, OH, has about 10 irradiation facilities in the U.S. and Canada. The company recently has not announced plans to build any new facilities.

CFC Logistics

CFC Logistics is a recent arrival to the food irradiation scene, starting operations in 2004. Despite months of controversy and opposition by local residents, the plant opened after a settlement was reached between the township and the company. The settlement stated that the Milfordd, PA Township would not prohibit the operation of CFC, but if CFC attempts to expand its irradiation facility it might be subject to a township ordinance barring irradiation facilities.

Food Technology Services

FTS provides irradiated beef and poultry to numerous stores throughout the South, in particular the grocery chain Publix. Recently, Food Technology Services has been struggling financially, leading to the possibility that the company may be dropped from the NASDAQ stock exchange.

SureBeam

Since the late 1990's, a dominant player in the irradiation industry has been SureBeam, a spin-off of defense contractor Titan. Headquartered in San Diego, SureBeam irradiated food with linear accelerators originally designed for the "Star Wars" missile defense system. SureBeam was an aggressive promoter of its technology and itself, and managed to move its irradiated product into numerous grocery stores before declaring bankruptcy in 2004. SureBeam filed bankruptcy after a series of problems, including questions about its accounting practices, lawsuits filed by disgruntled stockholders, and low demand for irradiated ground beef, the company's main product. SureBeam's assets are still tied up in court.

SureBeam had opened three irradiation facilities in recent years: in Sioux City, IA, in February 2000; in the Chicago suburb of Glendale Heights in October 2001; and in Vernon, CA, in August 2002. Since SureBeam's bankruptcy, those facilities are not believed to be operating. SureBeam's Glendale Heights facility was met with substantial local opposition. Citizens successfully pressured Illinois state environmental authorities to force SureBeam to apply for an air pollution permit, which the company had failed to do on its own. The state required SureBeam to report the facility's anticipated emissions of ozone, a smog-producing, highly volatile form of oxygen. Ozone exposure can cause major health problems and severe environmental damage. SureBeam was eventually granted an operating permit, however, and had started irradiating foods.

In addition, SureBeam co-managed a facility at Texan A&M University (the financial arrangements of which have been criticized). Although SureBeam is out of business, Texas A & M continues to operate the irradiation facility, and faculty at the university have promoted the use of irradiated foods in the National School Lunch Program. SureBeam also sold an irradiation machine to an operation in Hawaii that irradiates papayas and other tropical fruits called Hawaii Pride, and another to a Brazilian operation called TechIon. Initially, Hawaii Pride planned to open a gamma ray facility using radioactive cobalt-60, but significant community opposition led the company to change its mind and install an e-beam/X-ray machine instead. Like SureBeam, both the Hawaii and Brazil operations have experienced financial difficulties and it is unclear whether they are still operating.

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