

Special report: Familiar activists weigh in on cloning debate

Summary

Cloning has been a highly contested issue ever since Dolly the sheep was introduced to the public in 1997. Objections to the technology are many and varied, from moral and religious reasons to what the Consumer Federation's Carol Tucker Foreman calls the "yuck factor."

Cloning humans, cloning pets, cloning hair follicles for the cure of baldness – all generate passionate responses. The topic of food from cloned animals is not quite as controversial; but while government agencies review the issue, advocacy groups are taking the opportunity to denounce it.

Background

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) started studying the safety of food produced from cloned animals and their offspring in 2001. A report commissioned from the National Academy of Sciences found that clones present "a low level of food safety concern" based on the limited data available. FDA issued a draft summary of its risk assessment in 2003, concluding that cloned animals and their offspring posed no increased risk to food safety. According to an Oct. 6 *Washington Post* article "Hundreds of cloned pigs, cows and other animals are already living on farms around the country, as companies and livestock producers experiment and await a decision from the FDA." According to the *Post*, FDA's final risk assessment on food from cloned animals is forthcoming.

Consumer polling finds mixed results

The Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology recently released the results of a consumer poll exploring public knowledge of, and opinion about, genetically modified foods and animals. Pew found that although awareness continues to grow, consumers remain fairly unknowledgeable about these issues and feel particularly uncomfortable with the idea of animal cloning. Religious and ethical concerns play a significant role in consumer attitudes towards cloning, and most consumers believe the government should consider ethical and moral concerns when making regulatory decisions about cloning animals.

According to Pew, slightly more people oppose research into the genetic modification of animals (56%) than oppose genetically modified food. However, increased knowledge of transgenic animals increases levels of support, with 38 percent of those who have heard "a great deal" and 39

percent of those who have heard "some" about genetically modified animals favoring scientific research on the issue. Consumers are also more likely to support genetic modifying of animals for disease prevention purposes. Ultimately, consumers prefer a balance between producer and consumer interests (64%) that provides for government oversight without arbitrary and unnecessary bans. This Pew research is traditionally well-circulated and repeated by advocacy groups, and this report may generate the same.

Results of another recent poll showed that one-third of consumers "would definitely" buy meat and milk from cloned animals, and another one-third would consider it. The survey of 1,000 U.S. adults was conducted by Washington-based KRC Research for ViaGen, Inc. Importantly, an analysis of all polling data on this subject to date found that animal cloning is a subject on which public opinion is "soft," meaning opinions are still being formed.

Activists capitalize on confusing issue

Not surprisingly, many familiar animal rights activist groups have added cloning to their list of evils, claiming it poses unnecessary risks to farm animals. The Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Animal Protection Institute and Friends of Animals, for example, are on record against animal cloning. The groups traditionally opposed to any form of biotechnology in food production have also vocalized opposition to marketing the food products from the offspring of cloned livestock.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS):

In a letter to Dr. Steve Sundlof, Director of FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine, dated Oct. 9, 2002, HSUS wrote: "On behalf of the Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection organization with more than seven million constituents, we respectfully request that the Food and Drug Administration should urgently find means to prevent the entry of cloned animals, their byproducts, and their offspring into the food chain. The use of this technology for the production of food animals has too high a cost in terms of real and potential animal suffering and little benefit for humans and animals alike."

According to HSUS and other animal welfare advocates, FDA's draft risk assessment gives short shrift to the severe animal health problems that the technology causes. Dr. Michael Appleby, previously with HSUS, called the costs associated with cloning "graphic."

“Even among bovine clones surviving to the perinatal stage, one-third then died by the age of one year,” Appleby said. He added that FDA’s report contained “misleading understatement,” such as its contention that the number of live, normal births of clones appears to be increasing. “It is increasing,” Appleby noted, “from very, very bad to very bad.” (<http://www.hsus.org>)

The Center for Food Safety (CFS): “CFS seeks to ensure that foods derived from cloned livestock do not make their way onto our dining room tables. CFS has called on the FDA to institute an immediate and mandatory moratorium on the marketing of food products derived from cloned animals or their offspring. The FDA must acknowledge that its initial pronouncement on the safety of food from cloned animals was premature. Future assessments must address a broad range of human health and animal welfare issues.” (<http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org>)

Consumers Union: Some advocacy groups, like Consumers Union, are not taking up the cry for animal wellbeing but rather using cloning to raise peripheral food safety concerns. Consumers Union’s Michael Hansen has said “FDA failed to address the question of whether stress from developmental problems might result in the increased shedding of pathogens in the feces of animal clones. Such a boost in bacterial load could result in more contaminated carcasses entering the food supply.”

Friends of the Earth: Brent Blackwelder, President of Friends of the Earth, an organization well-known for its anti-GMO campaigns, testified against cloning before the Senate Appropriations Committee in January 2002. Blackwelder included this reference to products from cloned animals: “The recent finding of premature arthritis in Dolly is one of the strongest indicators to date that there should be, at a minimum, a moratorium on human cloning and on commercial animal production through cloning. What parent wants to risk a child that will be diseased, deformed or developmentally disabled after a few years? Who wants to eat food that may be harmful?”

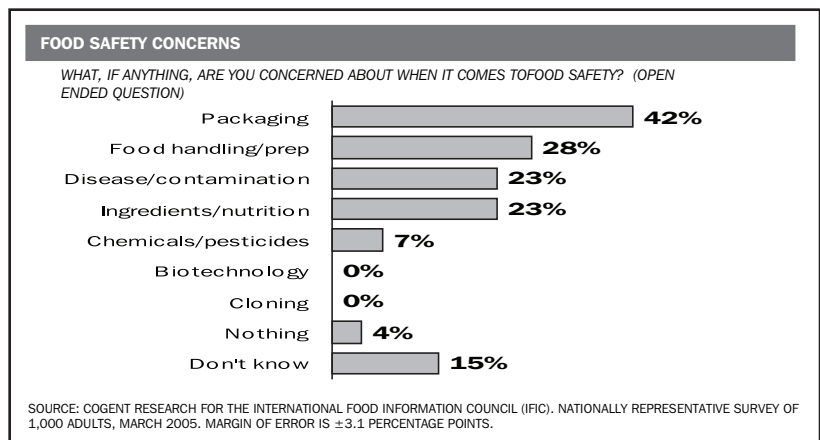
Organic Consumers Association (OCA): Currently, OCA has three separate campaigns specifically focused on eliminating existing genetically modified foods, so it’s likely this group would launch a similar campaign opposed to livestock cloning. OCA says consumers unknowingly purchase genetically engineered products already, making them part of a dangerous experiment because according to OCA, these foods can set off allergies, increase cancer risks, produce

antibiotic-resistant pathogens, damage food quality and produce dangerous toxins.

Consumer Federation of America (CFA): In response to the 2003 preliminary ruling by FDA that foods from cloned animals are safe, CFA’s Carol Tucker Foreman said in a statement, “concerns about animal cloning go beyond narrow scientific issues. The National Academy of Sciences Committee on Animal Biotechnology said it is important for the U.S. government to recognize and address moral, ethical and social concerns raised by animal cloning. While some forms of animal cloning may have inherent benefits, others are hard to justify. FDA needs to make, or ask another government agency to make, some decisions about appropriate uses of cloning. One of the first uses anticipated is cloning cows in order to make more milk. The U.S. has a huge surplus of milk that costs taxpayers millions of dollars a year in price support payments. Is there justification in cloning animals to make even more milk and impose even more financial burden on the public?”

Organic Trade Association (OTA): A 2003 OTA statement called on FDA to base its cloning policy on long-term research. “As the body responsible for protecting the safety of American citizens, FDA is morally obliged to take a precautionary approach. Its knowledge must extend well beyond short-term findings if milk, meat and other foods from cloned animals are to enter the food system,” said Katherine DiMatteo, executive director for OTA, which represents the \$11 billion organic industry in North America.

These are just a few of the groups prepared to campaign against FDA’s approval of food products from a cloned animal’s offspring. Many other organizations are watching the issue, posting news alerts to Web sites to keep the issue top of mind and sending alerts to sympathizers. If cloning truly is a “soft” issue and consumers are still developing their opinions, the public debate and industry communication following FDA’s announcement will be critical to consumer confidence in product safety and the future of this technology.



Key Points

- The issue of cloning has been contested since 1997 when Dolly was introduced to the public, but the debate has intensified with FDA's decision regarding the meat and milk products from the offspring of cloned livestock expected soon.
- Familiar activist groups like the Humane Society of the United States and Consumers Union are already positioning themselves to campaign against the technology, claiming the practice could be harmful to animals and unsafe for humans.
- Consumer polls show mixed results when it comes to whether products from the progeny of cloned animals will be accepted in the marketplace. Analysis of the results suggests cloning may be a "soft" issue, on which consumers are still forming their opinion.
- Communication following FDA's announcement will be critical to maintaining consumer confidence in product safety and protecting the future of agriculture technology; particularly considering that one poll found more knowledgeable consumers are more supportive of researching cloning technology.