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## **FDA set to rule on clone products**

### **Congress weighs bid to delay decision on meat and milk**

By Jonathan D. Rockoff

Sun reporter

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WASHINGTON

A long-running clash over the marketing of meat and milk from cloned animals is coming to a head in Washington as the government prepares to make a ruling that would allow the products to be sold to consumers for the first time.

Critics in Congress, including Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski of Maryland, are attempting to delay the action expected from the Food and Drug Administration, which could decide as early as this week to permit sales. These opponents are rushing to gain approval by Congress this week of a provision that would encourage the FDA to delay action until further studies are completed.

Meanwhile, biotechnology companies plan to unveil a campaign today that would enable consumers to learn whether the meat and milk they are buying comes from cloned animals, once the government allows those products to hit store shelves.

Widespread fears for the safety of food from cloned animals have kept the FDA from lifting a voluntary 2001 moratorium on sales. Studies show that three out of five Americans are uncomfortable with the cloned products, even though many scientists say that there's no added risk and that it would take

years for food from cloned animals to make it to the marketplace.

Grocers and food companies fear that FDA approval would frighten customers and depress milk and meat sales. That has left biotechnology companies in a regulatory limbo, awaiting the opportunity to tap into what they see as a lucrative market.

The tracking system is designed to enable supermarkets to tell customers whether the gallon of milk or cut of steak they are buying came directly from a clone.

"There are people who will go, 'Oh, yuck,' and this will give them a way to deal with it," said Mark Walton, president of ViaGen Inc., a leading cloning company.

But critics say the industry effort wouldn't go far enough. For one thing, they point out, food makers would not be required to participate. Perhaps more important, the program would not cover sales of meat and milk made from the offspring of clones, which are far more likely to be sources of the food because the clones themselves are too valuable to be used for anything but breeding.

Critics called the tracking system a desperate effort to provide cover for the FDA to make an unpopular decision.

"It really is an exercise in public relations," said Joseph Mendelson, legal director of the Center for Food Safety, a liberal interest group.

Mikulski has led congressional efforts to delay FDA action, placing provisions in farm and spending legislation that would require more study of the issue.

"Before we allow cloned animals into our food supply, we must know more about it," the Maryland Democrat said. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat, also urged the FDA to wait.

Under the industry's voluntary tracking plan, every part of the food chain, from a rancher's breeding livestock to supermarkets, would have to participate in order for consumers to know what they were buying.

The cloning companies - ViaGen in Austin, Texas, and Trans Ova Genetics

in Sioux City, Iowa - would give each cloned animal an identification number and an ear tag that would emit that number via radio frequencies. Clone owners would pledge to properly identify, sell and dispose of the animals so that food processors and sellers would know from what livestock they were getting meat and milk.

Grocers could then confidently say whether they were selling pork chops from clones.

"This isn't about product safety but more about how do we help with marketing claims," said Dave Faber, Trans Ova's chief executive.

Some industry groups, such as the National Milk Producers Federation, representing 45,000 dairy farmers across the country, described the program as an encouraging step toward easing consumers' minds. But other food industry groups, in a measure of the issue's sensitivity, refrained from endorsing the plan.

Of the tens of millions of cattle, pigs, goats and sheep in America, fewer than 600 are clones. It would take several years for a significant number of products derived from clones to go on sale, according to cloning companies.

Still, consumer reaction is a serious concern.

"The question I think a lot of consumers will ask is, 'What's wrong with what we have now?'" said William K. Hallman, director of the Food Policy Institute at Rutgers University, who has polled Americans about the issue. He said consumers don't know enough about the issue to form educated opinions.

Late last year, the FDA tentatively concluded that milk and meat from cloned livestock are safe to consume.

A spokesman said the agency was reviewing public comments and had not made a final decision. Congressional officials, industry and interest groups expect a decision soon.

Critics worry that the FDA might want to act before any of the congressional measures delaying action becomes law, sometime between this week and the end of the year.

"People don't want to drink milk from cloned animals," said Carol Tucker

Foreman of the Consumer Federation of America.

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