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Senate panel passes cloned food labeling bill

Products from clones and descendants move closer to stores

Matthew Yi, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau
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(04-12) 04:00 PDT Sacramento -- If and when milk and meat from cloned livestock start showing up in your local grocery store, labels on the food would let you know if it came from a cloned animal or its progeny under a bill that moved forward in the state Legislature on Wednesday.

The bill by Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, was prompted by the Food and Drug Administration's recent preliminary conclusion that cloned cows, swine and goats are safe to eat.

Although the FDA will continue gathering public comment until May 3, the agency is expected to adopt the preliminary decision as final.

Migden said that regardless of whether one supports or opposes eating cloned animals, it is prudent public policy to at least let consumers know what's on their grocery store shelves.

"It's a consumers' right to know measure," she said.

The Senate Health Committee agreed with Migden, approving SB63 by a 6-4 vote with Democrats supporting the legislation and Republicans opposing it.

Migden isn't alone in addressing the issue. Assemblyman Ira Ruskin, D-Redwood City, has a similar bill in the lower house that is scheduled to be heard in the Assembly Health committee Tuesday.

State lawmakers in Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana and Washington are contemplating similar legislation, and separate bills also have been introduced in both houses of Congress.

Critics of the California legislation argued Wednesday the bill is unnecessary for a number of reasons, including that the legislation addresses an issue that doesn't exist. The FDA's decision is still pending and there is nothing to label at the moment because there is a voluntary ban on using cloned animals for manufacturing food, said Susan LaGrande, a lobbyist for the California Cattlemen's Association.

Besides, even if the federal agency were to decide such a practice would be allowed, the high costs of

cloning makes it cost-prohibitive to use that method for producing livestock for mass consumption, she said.

"It's very expensive. We're talking \$15,000 to \$20,000," LaGrande said, adding that ranchers will likely clone for breeding purposes rather than for food supply.

Others said forcing food manufacturers to label their products when there is no reason to warn the public of health risks will only cause unnecessary confusion and fear among consumers.

Sen. Sam Aanestad, R-Grass Valley (Nevada County), who is the Health Committee's vice-chairman, agreed with the opponents of the measure, saying such legislation is a "knee-jerk reaction."

But the proponents of Migden's bill said there are wide-ranging concerns about allowing cloned livestock to be a part of the human food supply.

Eric Schlosser, author of "Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal," testified that his own research of the topic has found no definitive study on the short- and long-term effects of eating cloned animals.

Besides, "if cloning is such a wonderful thing, these companies should be proud to put that on their labels," he said during a news conference organized by Migden earlier in the day.

Migden also had the support of the Consumers Union's director of food policy initiatives, who criticized the FDA's study by saying that the number of cloned animals used was far too small.

Also, cloned animals tend to suffer from deficient immune systems, which means ranchers will need to use more antibiotics to keep that livestock healthy, said Jean Halloran of the Consumers Union.

Migden said she acknowledges the concerns surrounding cloned animals, but her bill is simply letting consumers know what they are buying in grocery stores. Still, the senator said she is at the very least skittish about eating cloned livestock.

"It's better to be cautious than capricious," she said.

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San Francisco Chronicle Sections Go

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