

# Zharoff criticizes 'blackmail' effort

by Sen. Fred F. Zharoff  
Senate District N

The proponents of House Bill 25 — which would ban the importation and sale of irradiated food in Alaska — are essentially engaged in an effort to blackmail Alaska's seafood industry.

## OPINION Unangan Tunukun The Aleuts Speak

The only threat currently facing Alaska's seafood industry from food irradiation is the threat of bad publicity generated by HB 25's supporters as they take whatever measures they feel are necessary to get the bill passed. They are evidently prepared to engage in a misinformation campaign that will hurt the industry they say they are trying to save.

I hope all the people involved in Alaska's seafood industry will join with me in rejecting these blackmail tactics.

In this article, I hope to correct some of the misinformation circulating about food irradiation and HB 25.

Late last session, HB 25 was referred to the Senate Finance Committee and, at my request, was assigned to me in a subcommittee of one for review and recommendation. Initially, my interest in the measure concerned this technology's possible application to the seafood industry.

My review of the matter began with consultations with fisheries biologists, seafood scientists/researchers and seafood processors. The unanimous recommendation was that the proposed ban would be premature at this time.

Food irradiation — the exposure of food products to ionizing energy in order to eliminate micro-organisms that cause illness and spoilage — is being explored around the world. Further development and refinement of this technology may have relevant application to the seafood industry in the future.

Having served as a legislator for 12 years, I have learned it is very difficult to remove a law from statute once it has been adopted. The adoption of the permanent ban in HB 25 would not be advisable at this time.

Currently, the World Health Organization, the American Medical Association and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have endorsed the food irradiation process. In the United States, the FDA has approved irradiation for wheat, wheat flour, potatoes, pork, fresh produce and spices.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services wrote a position paper opposing HB 25. The Institute of Northern Engineering at the University of Alaska has stated that irradiated foods are wholesome and have the potential to improve public health. American astronauts have been consuming irradiated foods in space since the Apollo program.

Information circulated by organizations advocating the ban contains false statements, partial truths and threats.

The "informational materials" circulated by advocates for the bill state that New York, New Jersey and Maine all have banned food irradiation. In fact, New York and New Jersey have invoked only temporary moratoriums.

An information packet circulated by HB 25's main supporter, SANE/Alaska, contains the statement that Gov.

Steve Cowper's decision not to apply for U.S. Department of Energy grant funds for a test project "did nothing to stop private enterprise from building a seafood irradiator in Kodiak."

As a result, rumors are being spread that a food irradiator will be built, is being built or has been built in Kodiak. None of this is true.

While the technology is controversial, distinctions must be made between the type of irradiation employed and the levels of exposure. The two processes being discussed are machine generated beams of electrons (ionization) or gamma rays from radioactive isotopes.

The electron beam ionization process does not involve radioactive materials. Ionization irradiation is a physical process like freezing, drying and pasteurization, used to extend food shelf life and kill bacteria.

The impression given by those who support a ban, however, is that gamma radiation with cobalt 60 or cesium 137 would be the method employed. The Institute of Northern Engineering,

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in its study of irradiation, ruled this process out.

I have learned the organization threatening an Alaska seafood boycott, FIN Japan, is an anti-nuclear activist group. They apparently have an affiliation to a consumer group with 3,000 members in a country with a population exceeding 105 million.

Given the level of investment and participation by the Japanese in our seafood industry, a Japanese boycott is hard to fathom. All the details we have so far cast doubt on this organiza-

tion's capacity to organize such a boycott if, in fact, they had any reason to do so.

Especially disturbing is the extortion aspect, where if we, the citizens of Alaska, do not approve a certain bill in our Legislature, this Japanese group will threaten one of our industries.

I would be pleased to accept collect calls from my constituents to discuss this issue, and I can be reached at 465-3473 in my Juneau office. My address is: Sen. Fred Zharoff, Box V, Juneau 99811.