

Editorial

Food for Thought

In a press notice of 20 July (P/2001/384), the DTI tells us of 'tomorrow's world'. Is this Nanny State or sensible future planning? Zero calorie cake, broccoli that could combat cancer, and packaging that warns you that its contents have gone off, are all on the menu in a government consultation, launched on 20 July, to test whether hypothetical foods of the future are to the taste of UK consumers. Consumers are being asked to say what they think about hypothetical future foods through an online consultation site being hosted by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). The consultation, which is part of a national study under the DTI's Foresight programme, will help to provide recommendations to government, industry and other organisations.

Alastair Robertson, Chair of the Foresight Food Chain and Crops for Industry Panel and Director of the Institute of Food Research, said:

"Technology has given us a wider variety of foods than ever before, and made food safer to eat and longer-lasting. But many people are concerned that new technology may be introduced without adequate information and public debate about their potential benefits and risks. This consultation is part of a national exercise to find ways of improving communication and dialogue with the public about potential new future foods."

The consultation will take place throughout the next month and asks visitors whether they would buy any of the five hypothetical food products described on the site:

Anti-Cancer Broccoli

Broccoli could be good for your health in an unexpected new way. In the future we could see vegetables that, when eaten lightly cooked, deliver a dose of a potent anti-cancer chemical.

Long-Life Lasagne

Imagine a range of meals, such as lasagne, which you don't have to refrigerate and which last on your shelf as long as a tin of beans.

The Scottish Banana

Tropical fruits like bananas can't grow in the British climate and so have to be transported a long way to reach our table. New technologies could give us varieties of fruit that can grow out-of-doors in the cold climate of the UK. So, people in Scotland could be eating home-grown "Scottish Bananas".

Smart Labelling - Food Packaging with a Brain

What if our food packaging actually warned us when the food had gone off, could talk to your microwave or tell you where exactly the ingredients have come from?

Zero-Calorie Cake

In the future, food technology may make it possible to develop cakes that have extremely low calories (or even no calories), but which taste as good as conventional cakes.

Visitors to the site are given some of the pros and cons of these technologies and asked for their opinions. Some of the issues they are asked to comment on include:

Would consumers actually benefit from this?

Would you personally be worried by the development of this product?

What other benefits and risks are there?

Are the risks associated with this product hidden from the consumer?

Do you trust those responsible for ensuring the product is safe?

Would you like to know more about the technology before you used this?

A report on the consultation will be published later in the year.

The consultation site will be found at: www.bbsrc.ac.uk/life/scififoods. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) is the UK's leading funding agency for research in the non-medical life sciences. BBSRC research underpins industries including the agricultural, bioprocessing, chemical, food, health care and pharmaceutical sectors. www.bbsrc.ac.uk. The Consultation will form part of BBSRC Life - a collection of on-line exhibitions exploring the science and issues of biological research. www.bbsrc.ac.uk/life

The UK Foresight programme brings together the voices of business, government, the science base and others to look at what might happen in the future and what we need to do now to secure a long-term competitive advantage and enhance quality of life for all. The reports from thirteen panels of the second round of Foresight were published in December 2000. A review of the programme is currently underway to build on the success of the programme and to ensure that it focuses on the challenges that lie ahead. The outcome of the review will be known later this year. More details on Foresight can be found at www.foresight.gov.uk.

The possibilities for litigation lawyers appear to be rapidly expanding!

Susan Nicholas