

CNNfn: Money & Markets
(c) 2003 Federal Document Clearing House. All Rights Reserved.

Friday, October 31, 2003

Business

Cloning Translating Into Big Business and Safety Issues, CNNfn
David Haffenreffer

DAVID HAFFENREFFER, CNNfn ANCHOR, MONEY & MARKETS: Well, would you dig into a piece of steak or take a bite chicken from a cloned animal? Don't laugh. The day when your supermarket sells cloned meat may be a bit closer than you think. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration released a draft report today that calls milk and meat from cloned animals safe for consumers. A public meeting on the issue will be held next week. Joining us to talk about how cloning may soon translate into big business and the safety issues that are already being raised on the issue, Andrew Kimbrell. He's executive director for the Center for Food Safety, and Gregory Conko, the director of the food safety policy at the **Competitive Enterprise Institute**. They both come to us today from Washington, D.C. Welcome to you both.

GREGORY CONKO, COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE INST.: Good to be with you.

ANDREW KIMBRELL, CENTER FOR FOOD SAFETY: Thanks for having me.

HAFFENREFFER: We have a statement here from the FDA today, and the quote that we have from them reads as follows -- food products derived from animal clones and their offspring are likely to be as safe to eat as food from their non- clone counterparts, based on all the evidence available. These scientific findings also show that healthy adult clones are virtually indistinguishable from their conventional counterparts. Andrew Kimbrell, the word that stuck out in this quote for me is the word "likely." How do you guys feel about this? You're not necessarily in favor of this idea.

KIMBRELL: Yes, you're thinking like a lawyer. That likely word has a lot hidden in it. Actually, if you look at this very curious document, this draft risk assessment, it's not a regulation or even a policy. It says we've done no studies on the meat itself, zero. So we're saying the stuff is safe even though we've done no studies on the meat whatsoever. And really importantly, last year, only a year ago the National Academy of Sciences put a very distinguished panel together to look at this and they said because of the genetic abnormalities in these clones and the disease agents, the pathogens in these animals and their fecal matter there are serious safety issues that have to be addressed. In other words, you've got to look at this meat before you're saying it's safe. Now, here's a year later, FDA ignores the National Academy of Sciences and says it's safe even though we've done no tests and we haven't even looked at the meat, very curious indeed.

HAFFENREFFER: Gregory Conko, disease and genetic abnormalities may or may not translate into health risks, but --

CONKO: Well, Andy is mischaracterizing the report a little bit. In fact, the FDA's report was not at all a surprise given the outcome of last year's National Academy of Sciences report. They found that there are some problems in the cloning process but once cloned animals reach adulthood, we have every reason to believe that milk, meat, and eggs from these animals are as safe as milk, meat, and eggs from conventionally bred animals. So the real question, as I think Andy points out, is what happens next. This was just an interim report from the FDA. We expect them to publish some formal policy recommendations probably in the next six months, accept public comment, and then publish a final rule within a year, I would guess. So the question is -- we don't know exactly what FDA is going to do from here on in.

KIMBRELL: Well, one thing I'd like them to do is to do the science, to actually look at the milk, let's look at the eggs, let's look at the meat and test it before we say it's safe.

CONKO: Andy, that's a red herring. You know --

KIMBRELL: No, it's not a red herring.

CONKO: The FDA doesn't actually conduct testing of anything.

KIMBRELL: No, no, no, no, hold on. (INAUDIBLE) studies that show it's safe. Let me finish. I let you finish. They have to have peer reviewed studies that show it's safe. They haven't done that. The National Academy of Sciences said let's do it. A lot of the companies that are making these animals are in severe trouble. ACT out of Massachusetts, a number of others are losing like crazy and I'm a bit concerned that this strange draft risk assessment was out there to boost these companies rather than to really assure Americans that this food is safe.

CONKO: Well, there's no reason to believe the FDA has ever rushed into much of anything. As a matter of fact --

KIMBRELL: The FDA has a long history of unfortunately approving everything from breast implants to food that have not been safe, and sometimes they serve the companies before the public, and we need to make sure that's not --

CONKO: As a matter of fact, even on the breast implant issue, FDA has acted precipitously to keep things off the market that were safe, as we're finding out now. Nevertheless, the point remains, FDA doesn't do its own testing on anything, pharmaceuticals, medical devices food additives. We rely on the scientific community, mostly at university-based research centers, to do peer reviewed, publishable scientific studies -

KIMBRELL: And there are no peer reviewed studies on this.

CONKO: That is just not true.

KIMBRELL: There are no peer reviewed studies. No, read the FDA document page 5. There's no peer-reviewed studies whatsoever on the safety of this meat. We need to have those peer-reviewed studies before we even talk about putting this meat in supermarkets.

HAFFENREFFER: How about proper labeling? Let's just say this food does come to the marketplace. Greg, would you be in favor of properly marking it as being sourced from cloned animals?

CONKO: Well, there's two different questions here. One is if the food product that's made from the cloned animals is in fact different from that which is conventional, we have every reason to expect that it should be labeled --

HAFFENREFFER: But as long as the FDA is saying that it is likely the same, shouldn't they consider labeling it just so people can make that choice at the supermarket?

CONKO: The market is perfectly capable of supplying information just as it does with organic food. Organic food -- where there's a consumer demand for information, the market usually finds a way of supplying it. If food companies, which are out there telling us that they are concerned that their consumers will accept the meat and milk from cloned animals, they have every reason to tell consumers that they don't use cloned meat --

KIMBRELL: The government here has an obligation - the government has an obligation, if it's putting this new food on the market to make sure it's labeled. There is no --

CONKO: The government has an obligation to make sure that the food is safe. If the food is safe, there's --

HAFFENREFFER: Gentlemen, we can only hear one of you.

KIMBRELL: There's no dispute that this food and this technique is immensely cruel to animals. No one disagrees with that. The FDA says it. The animal suffering involved here. They have about a 1 percent success rate. You have 99, 199 out of 200 animals suffering usually premature death and some horrifying birth deformities here. There's no doubt about that. On that basis alone --

CONKO: I've got news for you, Andy. Every animal that becomes food suffers a premature death.

KIMBRELL: On that basis alone, on that basis alone, consumers should have the right to pick whether they want to eat this food which is causing that incredible and unusual and unprecedented level of suffering.

HAFFENREFFER: All right, Gregory. Go ahead.

CONKO: Every animal that becomes food suffers a premature death. We do know that there are some problems with the technology in the early formative stages of creating a cloned animal. Once the animal is an adult, once it reaches adulthood in healthy fashion --

KIMBRELL: There's not been a single healthy adult clone. That's why Ian Wilmett (ph) who created Dolly has given up. Roslyn (ph) Institute doesn't even do cloning anymore because they have not been able - they do not understand the genetic process right now --

CONKO: Andy, you asked me to wait for you to finish. Would you please do me the same courtesy?

KIMBRELL: Just be accurate.

CONKO: I am being accurate. It's you that's I think stretching the truth a little bit. The fact of the matter is we have scientific knowledge, the National Research Council and now the FDA, lots of other peer-reviewed studies have found -- come to the conclusion that healthy adult animals produce meat, milk, and eggs that are safe. There's no reason --

KIMBRELL: There's no peer-reviewed studies, name one. Name one peer-reviewed study that shows it's safe. The FDA didn't and couldn't and said it couldn't. What peer-reviewed studies do you have that the FDA didn't have?

CONKO: I don't have them in hand right now.

KIMBRELL: No one does because they don't exist. Let's make sure they do exist. and for goodness sake FDA shouldn't be saying anything is safe even in a draft risk assessment unless they got the peer reviewed science and they don't have it.

HAFFENREFFER: Andrew, we understand it's going to be the FDA's veterinary medicine advisory committee is going to be meeting November 4th to talk about this publicly.

KIMBRELL: Should be a lively meeting.

HAFFENREFFER: Procedurally, how long does it take for something to go from a draft executive summary to legality?

KIMBRELL: I think you're looking at least six months before there would be any draft regulations, and they would face I think a storm of protest by almost every food safety group out there. So I do think that this draft is more of a trial balloon than anything else and a trial balloon that deserves to be shot down.

HAFENREFFER: Gregory, obviously, the food makers that are involved in this space want to get the foods onto the shopping -- the supermarket Shelves as soon as possible. How long could that take if they got the go-ahead tomorrow?

CONKO: Well, it's not at all clear that a lot of food companies want these. As a matter of fact, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the National Food Processors Association has already put out cautions following in the wake of the FDA release that they are concerned, they don't want them. And if food companies are concerned, they can make a contractual stipulation with their animal breeders not to use cloned animals. That said, the final process for FDA publishing the final report, then publishing a proposed policy guidance, accepting public comments, and then publishing a final review, final law, would probably take at least a year. So I would expect it would be at least 2005, early 2005 before meat, milk, and eggs from cloned animals appears on store shelves.

HAFENREFFER: We'll leave it there. Gregory Conko from the **Competitive Enterprise Institute** and Andrew Kimbrell from the Center for Food Safety, thanks very much.