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Cloned Livestock Gain a Foothold in Europe

By **JAMES KANTER**

ALBRIGHTON, England — Many Europeans recoil at the very idea of cloning animals. But a handful of breeders in Switzerland, Britain and possibly other countries have imported semen and embryos from cloned animals or their progeny from the United States, seeking to create more consistently plump and productive livestock.

And although no vendor has publicly acknowledged it, meat or dairy products originating from such techniques are believed to be already on supermarket shelves.

The amounts are no doubt small, and the sale appears to be legal. But the development is noteworthy on a continent that has long objected to [genetically modified crops](#) and where many people look at animal cloning as potentially dangerous and cruel — even immoral.

“Although no safety concerns have been identified so far with meat produced from cloned animals, this technique raises serious issues about animal welfare, reduction of biodiversity, as well as ethical concerns,” Corinne Lepage, a French member of the [European Parliament](#), said this month before a vote there in favor of a blanket ban.

In the United States, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) declared in 2008 that food from cloned cattle, pigs, goats and their progeny was safe to eat. (Cloned sheep were left off the list, but their progeny were declared O.K.) The Agriculture Department, however, has asked farmers to voluntarily keep all direct clones out of the food supply for an unspecified period so it can manage a “smooth and orderly” transition to market.

In Europe, government officials say that anyone who wanted to market meat or dairy products

from clones would need to seek permission under the [European Union's](#) "novel foods" regulations, which were generally meant to cover newly developed ingredients. So far, no one has.

Meat and dairy products from the offspring of clones, however, currently receive no prior assessment or approval.

The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health reported in a relatively obscure part of its Web site that "dairy products and meat derived from such animals have probably been used in food, then sold in Switzerland."

"Other countries in Europe face the same situation," it said.

The technique has even infiltrated one of the Continent's most ancient traditions: in May, one of Spain's grandest breeders produced the first cloned fighting bull.

"It's absolutely historic, and it's remarkable that we achieved this with the symbol of Spain," said Julio César Díez, a veterinarian who worked on the project.

Got, as the bull was named, will never face a matador — or end up on a dinner plate. He is expected to spend his life a stud, siring other bulls for the ring for the Guardiola family, which has bred the Pedraja line of bulls in the region of Seville for several generations.

At today's prices, the family could expect to make around 1.5 million euros (\$2 million) from selling the bulls that Got fathers — naturally — during his lifetime.

Much bigger stakes are in sight for the meat and dairy industry, which argues that cloning can give more farmers access to star animals with leaner meat, bigger milking potential and enhanced disease resistance.

Far from being outlandish, they say, cloning is among a number of breeding techniques that are becoming mainstays of the industry.

Europeans already are deeply involved in related businesses that have grown rapidly in recent years as breeders seek the most productive animals. Some of the biggest cattle genetics companies and cooperatives in the world — including Alta Genetics, CRV, Genus and Viking

Genetics — are European-owned.

Fierce public opposition has limited the use of cloning in Europe, however, leaving producers fearful of falling behind competitors in the United States and elsewhere.

“We mustn’t build up a fortress against cloning and the offspring of clones,” said Arnaud Petit, a director at Copa-Cogeca, the largest European association of farmers and cooperatives. “We have to produce more food with fewer resources and less impact on the environment, and cloning could be one of the ways forward.”

This month, the European Parliament voted to ban the sale of meat and dairy from cloned animals and from the offspring of clones.

But European governments — weary from battles over genetically modified crops — are wary of fomenting a new trade war with major agricultural trading partners like Argentina, Brazil and the United States.

They will begin negotiating in September with Parliament members to finish the rules.

In the last three years in Britain, farmers used imported embryos to produce at least three animals. But that prompted a storm of criticism in the national media, while opponents of cloning warned that foods were about to appear in supermarkets without proper safety checks.

An employee at Humphreston Farm, near Birmingham — the farm at the center of that storm — said the owners, Michael and Oliver Eaton, had since sold their herd and were growing crops instead.

The employee, who would not give his name, said the Eaton family did not want to comment on what had happened to their cows bred from clones.

Another British dairy farmer said he was using milk from a cow bred from a clone as part of his daily production. He also said he was selling embryos from the same cow to breeders in Canada.

The farmer insisted on anonymity, saying that the British public regarded cloning as so distasteful that buyers would stop taking his milk.

He also said that he did not want to be required to get rid of a valuable cow. His activities appear to be at odds with the position of the British Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A spokeswoman for the department said last week that, as far as officials were aware, no meat or dairy from the offspring of clones bred from imports of semen or embryo had entered the food chain in Britain.

In Switzerland, famous for its cheese and chocolates, the government says “several hundred” cattle that are second- or third-generation descendants of clones are in the country. It notes, however, that that is a “very low” percentage of the 1.5 million head of cattle there.

The race to produce the first cloned fighting bulls in Spain initially involved two rival teams. But ViaGen, a large biotechnology company based in Texas, has slowed down its efforts in Spain, citing the controversy over the procedure in Europe.

“We just didn’t want to rock any boats,” said ViaGen’s president, Mark Walton.

Yet Mr. César Diez, who performed the insemination that led to Got, said he expected clones and their offspring to become more common in a few years for livestock farmers in Europe because of the growing demand for high-quality meat at affordable prices.

“When you can select animals that produce so much more meat per kilo of grain feed, the logic of cloning is inevitable,” he said.