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FDA causes furor over ban of wooden shelves in cheese aging

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It started out as a communication between two governing parties regarding the need for a clearer explanation of an existing policy, but over the weekend, a simple blog post went viral and the cheese-making industry was turned upside down.

It all started with an [innocent inquiry](#). In January, Monica Metz, branch chief of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition's Dairy and Egg Branch, responded to questions raised by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. New York officials wanted some clarification on the FDA's policy after a number of cheese makers in the state received citations for their use of wooden shelves during FDA inspections. Apparently, Metz told the official in New York that aging cheese on wooden boards goes against the FDA's already established "Current Good Manufacturing Practice" because they cannot be cleaned adequately.

This is an excerpt from the [FDA regulations](#):

"Microbial pathogens can be controlled if food facilities engage in good manufacturing practice. Proper cleaning and sanitation of equipment and facilities are absolutely necessary to ensure that pathogens do not find niches to reside and proliferate. Adequate cleaning and sanitation procedures are particularly important in facilities where persistent strains of pathogenic microorganisms like *Listeria monocytogenes* could be found. The use of wooden shelves, rough or otherwise, for cheese ripening does not conform to cGMP requirements, which require that "all plant equipment and utensils shall be so designed and of such material and workmanship as to be adequately cleanable, and shall be properly maintained." 21 CFR 110.40(a). Wooden shelves or boards cannot be adequately cleaned and sanitized. The porous structure of wood enables it to absorb and retain bacteria, therefore bacteria generally colonize not only the surface but also the inside layers of wood. The shelves or boards used for aging make direct contact with finished products; hence they could be a potential source of pathogenic microorganisms in the finished products."

Needless to say, Metz's response to the question over FDA policy caused quite a furor in the artisan cheese making community. That this incident took place in January, and is just now

hitting the wires, well, it is something to ponder. But the rumors began to circulate that the FDA was going to ban the use of wooden boards used as shelving in the cheese-aging process.

"A sense of disbelief and distress is quickly rippling through the U.S. artisan cheese community," wrote Cheese Underground blogger Jeanne Carpenter of Madison, Wisconsin. In her blog, dated Saturday, June 7, Carpenter also says, "The most interesting part of the FDA's statement is that it does not consider this to be a new policy, but rather an enforcement of an existing policy. And worse yet, FDA has reiterated that it does not intend to change this policy."

[According to Reuters](#), the FDA is saying it has no new policy and has never taken action against a cheese maker based on their use of wooden shelves. But it is factual that the FDA has cited some cheese makers when their wooden shelves appeared to not have been adequately cleaned.

"In the interest of public health, the FDA's current regulations state that utensils and other surfaces that contact food must be 'adequately cleanable' and properly maintained," Lauren Sucher, an FDA spokeswoman, said in a statement.

The spokeswoman went on to say that the FDA has always expressed concerns over the use of wooden shelving in the cheese making process. she said, "The FDA is always open to evidence that shows that wood can be safely used for specific purposes, such as aging cheese." The FDA might want to [read a paper](#) published in 2013 by the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research on the subject (pages 8-9), concluding: "Considering the beneficial effects of wood boards on cheese ripening and rind formation, the use of wood boards does not seem to present any danger of contamination by pathogenic bacteria as long as a thorough cleaning procedure is followed." It is unsure at this writing how far the rumors will travel, but there is concern over imported cheeses like Comte, Beaufort and Reblochon, traditionally aged on wooden boards. "Did the FDA just ban European cheese?"

Bill Watson, a Cato Institute trade policy analyst blogged on Tuesday. To end it all, the FDA has apparently back down on the "rumored ban," or at least they are saying they have not made any changes in their policies. It looks like another misunderstanding.

The whole issue over the use of [wooden boards](#) in the cheese-aging process is ridiculous. Cheese making dates back almost 5,000 years. And cool specially selected caves, including the cobwebs, molds and whatever else lived there have all been an integral part of the cheese maker's list of tools and accessories, including the wooden boards used to age their cheeses.