

# The Washington Times

## **EDITORIAL: The FDA cuts the cheese**

**Cheeseheads save the wood aging boards, if only for now**

By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Cheese lovers are breathing a sigh of relief. The Obama administration has issued a temporary reprieve for high-end Brie, Gouda and other cheeses aged on wooden boards.

Busybodies at the Food and Drug Administration first said the centuries-old practice was dangerous to human health. The FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition's Dairy and Egg Branch decreed that wooden boards violated the Food Modernization and Safety Act.

"The use of wooden shelves, rough or otherwise," the order said, "for cheese ripening does not conform to [federal] 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.' Wooden shelves or boards cannot be adequately cleaned and sanitized."

This came as a bit of a surprise to the fastidious bureaucrats over in the European Union, where wooden boards for aging cheese are not only permitted, but sometimes required. The FDA had no science to back up the claim that the dangers of wooden boards outweighed the benefits. They were just making things up, as such busybodies frequently do.

Had the ban taken effect, America's artisanal cheesemakers might have been driven out of business and for no good reason. A number of European cheeses would have been barred from entry into the United States as well. The Cato Institute's K. William Watson points out that the most common complaint of American trade negotiators is that European regulators ignore science and base regulation on irrational fear. When American regulators do that, it's hard to encourage regulators on the Continent to use common sense.

Fortunately, fancy cheese has friends in high places. Artisanal cheese is a staple of dinner in the elite precincts of Manhattan, Hollywood and other places where the elite

meet to greet and eat. Cheeseheads speed-dialed their agents to demand action, and the FDA listened.

Hey, they were only kidding. The agency didn't really intend to ban wooden boards; it just wanted to conduct a "dialogue." Said a spokesman: "We recognize that the language used in this communication may have appeared more definitive than it should have." The FDA conceded that it "does not have data that directly associates these instances of contamination with the use of wood shelving." But the agency said, darkly, that it reserves the right to come up with an excuse to ban cheese in the future.

The regulatory dragon merely sleeps. The increasing control of what Americans eat, and how it's made, and the shrinking of choices is the inevitable result of federal food-monitoring law. The FDA has broad authority to swoop into any industry and declare time-tested techniques unsafe.

The cheesemakers were saved this time by the elites, upset that their winetasting palates might be offended by ordinary cheese manufactured on an assembly line, aged in stainless-steel vats and individually wrapped, in plastic, by the slice. You can do that to Velveeta and hard cheese for rats, and not harm it. But not to cheese.