

Food Standards Agency joint industry and public interest group meeting – Certain food additives and children’s behaviour - Tuesday 9th October 2007

Industry representatives:

British Soft Drinks Association (BSDA)
Somerfield Stores Ltd
Marks & Spencer (M&S)
Food & Drink Federation (FDF)
Dairy UK
British Retail Consortium (BRC)
Morrison Supermarkets plc
Food Additives & Ingredients Association (FAIA)
British Hospitality Association (BHA)
Organic Trade Group (OTC)

Public interest group representatives:

Netmums
Prince’s Foundation for Integrated Health (PFIH)
Hyperactive Children’s Support Group (HCSG)
University of Sussex
Which?
International Association for the Study of Obesity
Vega
British Nutrition Foundation (BNF)
Soil Association (SA)
The Food Commission (FC)
Sustain - The Alliance for Better Food and Farming

Introduction

The purpose of the joint meeting was to consider what steps had been taken to date and what future action could be taken to provide practical help to parents who wish to avoid foods and drinks that contain the additives used in the Southampton University study.

Representatives from a wide range of organisations attended the meeting (see list of attendees). A diverse range of views was expressed and a number of actions points were agreed which the FSA will take forward. Given the diverse views, comments made at the meeting have not been attributed in this note except for specific reference to work carried out by HCSG and Netmums.

Update on actions taken by Industry

Industry representatives were invited to provide an update on the actions they have taken with regard to the use of these colours in their food products, and what measures have been taken to provide information to consumers.

Several retailers explained that they had been working to remove artificial colours from all own brand products prior to the publication of the study. One retailer explained that currently, the majority of these products are now free from these colours and the removal of all azo dyes and artificial colours from their products is intended to be achieved before 1st July 2008.

Another retailer said that 99% of products across its range will be free of all artificial colours by the end of 2007. However, a replacement for sodium benzoate as a preservative in soft drinks is causing difficulty and a solution has yet to be discovered.

Some retailers indicated they had yet to find alternatives for the use of these colours in canned strawberries and canned peas.

Food manufacturers reported that they had been taking action to remove the artificial colours used in the study and this has been ongoing for several years. A recent Mintel survey indicated that there was a trend towards the removal of the artificial additives from products, which has been driven by consumer demand.

It was recognised that a technical symposium for industry, particularly SMEs, would be helpful. This would be organised by the FSA and the FDF.

The representative from the catering industry reported that similar action to the retailers was being taken by many caterers regarding their own brand products. Major catering companies comply with the legislation, and it was suggested that SMEs are more likely to carry on using artificial colours until or unless there is a change in legislation. The difficulties in providing information to SMEs was noted and suggestions were sought as to how this could be improved given that there are over 200,000 catering outlets to reach.

It was reported that the additive tartrazine has not been used in soft drinks for approximately 15 years and the majority of drinks that are aimed at children do not contain the colours investigated in the Southampton Study. Only 7% of the market is waiting for reformulation and this is mainly products such as energy drinks which contain caffeine. These products are not targeted at young children but public interest groups were concerned that they might still be purchased by them. It was also reported that when some products had been reformulated they weren't acceptable to consumer panels.

Organic food companies reported that they did not use the colours used in the study and did not see a need for the use of artificial colours.

Update on actions taken by public interest groups

Public interest group representatives were invited to provide feedback on what actions they have taken to inform consumers since the publication of the study.

The HCSG stated that it has been advising parents on hyperactivity in children for almost 30 years via parental workshops and over the phone. A food and behaviour diary is available on the website, which would enable consumers to keep a comprehensive record of events.

Some of the public interest groups stated that their position was that the additives used in the study should be banned, and that they did not think that the FSAs current position of providing information to consumers was an adequate response. Their view was that if the additives could not be banned then information regarding which products contained these colours needed to be publicised.

Netmums reported that a survey completed before the Southampton Study was published showed that 98% of respondents were concerned about behaviour and health and 87% wanted the removal or ban of the additives used in the study. A current list of product brands that are devoid of the additives in the study is available on the Netmums website.

General Discussion – Potential steps that can be taken collectively

Product Information

Concern was raised by some attendees regarding the excessive number of web links that have to be accessed via the FSA web page when attempting to get access to information on the use of colours. Some attendees supported a list of products containing the additives should be made available on the FSA website. The FSA said that it would not be able to compile these lists but confirmed that it was content for links from the FSA site to be set up to other organisations which provided lists of products that either contained or did not contain these additives.

Retailers considered that publishing a list of foods and drinks that contained these additives would be impractical, as many products were in the process of being reformulated so the list would not be representative of the market.

Concerns were raised regarding sweets sold loose as there was a lack of information to allow consumers to make an informed choice. The FSA noted that this was an issue that needed to be considered further. The meeting was advised that the three major confectionary companies were either in the process of or had already removed artificial colours from their products

Retailers also highlighted that industry had taken measures to advise consumers by highlighting information on front of pack statements e.g. "Contains no artificial colours" etc.

Information gathering and sharing

It was noted that a single trade body did not exist for the catering industry and the gathering of information from small manufacturers and outlets was extremely difficult. It was suggested that one way to improve communication would be to identify the smaller trade associations that represented the different sectors.

Additional potential steps that could be taken

The Agency was asked if it would issue a statement clarifying what further action it would like to see taken in respect of the colours used in the study prior to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) making a decision on the issue.

It was suggested that the text could be along the following lines "The FSA would like to see food producers and providers take the necessary voluntary action to remove the specified colours from the food chain by a specific date e.g. October 2008 at which point the FSA will consider what regulatory action might be taken".

The Agency agreed that a statement would be helpful to clarify what was happening during this interim period and that this would be considered further

Summary of the next steps that need consideration

The Agency will:

- Discuss with the FDF, a technical symposium that would target a range of companies including SME's, and consider how to disseminate the information more widely.

- Give further consideration for a statement to update stakeholders on what action has been taken since the Board meeting
- Consider improvements to FSA website to make this more practical, and add a link from the Agency webpage directly to the Netmums website
- Ask for information from industry regarding the action taken to date and future plans and timing. This information will be requested from a wider range of organisations (including SMEs) than those present at the meeting and will be used to inform a discussion at the FSA February Board meeting.