

CHEMICALS:

Industry making 'notable progress' in push for BPA alternatives -- report

Elana Schor, E&E reporter (10/21/2010)

General Mills Inc. and ConAgra Foods Inc. have joined the top tier of companies working to develop substitutes for the controversial packaging chemical bisphenol A (BPA), according to new rankings developed by two investor groups focused on corporate social responsibility.

The new arrivals atop the list of food-industry efforts to phase out BPA reflect "notable progress" toward wide availability of alternatives to the once-ubiquitous additive, the investor groups **As You Sow** and Green Century Capital Management wrote in their second annual report on the issue. In earning a B+ or better for their investment in BPA-free packaging, General Mills and ConAgra joined repeat high scorers Hain Celestial Group Inc. and H.J. Heinz Co.

The report on BPA alternatives comes after a year of heated political combat over the chemical, which can mimic hormones such as estrogen with a potentially disruptive effect on development. The Food and Drug Administration began a re-review of BPA's human health impact in January, setting off a lobbying battle between environmentalists and industry over its future presence as a popular additive in canned foods and hard plastics.

ConAgra, Hain and Heinz earned high marks for already using BPA substitutes in some of their packaged foods while committing to a timetable for going entirely BPA-free, according to surveys the companies returned to the two investor groups. General Mills reported setting a schedule for removing BPA from one of its canned products but was silent on the remaining brands.

Hain Senior Vice President Ellen Deutsch said in an interview that her company does not expect a federal ban on BPA in the near future but has pressed forward with testing and implementing alternatives despite the government's ongoing scientific review.

"We don't wait until it's something that consumers want" before acting on an issue such as BPA, Deutsch said. "We try to stay ahead of the curve. In the absence of consensus, if the information is compelling that [BPA] could be a negative product, I don't think we'd hide behind, 'Well, the scientific community isn't fully in agreement.'"

Three of the four companies ranked highest in their movement toward BPA-free products are members of the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), the influential trade association that opposes restrictions on the chemical's use in packaging. GMA and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce aligned with a long list of other business interests earlier this year against a proposal by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) that would ban BPA from children's food and drink products (*Greenwire* <<http://www.eenews.net/Greenwire/2010/04/26/archive/15>> , April 26).

Asked for a response to today's report on companies pursuing BPA substitutes, GMA said in a statement: "We agree with the FDA that foods in cans with linings that utilize BPA are safe, and that there is no need for consumers to change their consumption habits."

"We work continuously with suppliers to innovate and to constantly monitor emerging scientific evidence to improve

our products and packaging to protect the public health," the GMA statement continued. "And we are working in partnership with the FDA and the world's food safety agencies in our continuous efforts to ensure the safety and quality of our products and packaging."

Obstacles

Eight of the 26 companies surveyed told the two investor groups that they had spent company funds on researching BPA substitutes, a process that can involve costly and lengthy safety testing to ensure that alternative additives do not pose risks of their own.

Acidic canned goods such as tomatoes pose a particularly thorny challenge, since studies have shown that BPA leaches more quickly from their linings, but the market currently lacks a commercially viable alternative.

Deutsch, of Hain, said her company could start transitioning to BPA-free cans for acidic items in about a year. "These solutions can only come from industry," she said.

The authors of the new BPA report offered recommendations to companies concerned with the potential costs and risks of developing alternatives to the chemical. Green Century and **As You Sow**, the investor groups, urged businesses "to create a safety testing framework that goes beyond current regulatory requirements and addresses endocrine disruption ... so that companies will be able to avoid substituting one risk for another."

The two groups also urged GMA and other industry trade associations to endorse "legislation or regulations that encourage innovation and create consistent market signals in favor of BPA-free packaging" -- a development that appears unlikely at best, pending the completion of FDA's review of the chemical, expected to wind down later next year.

Click here <<http://www.greencentury.com/bpareport2010.pdf>> to read the BPA report from Green Century and **As You Sow**.