

ConAgra gets an "A" in BPA

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ConAgra gets an "A" for its treatment of BPA.

In a report released Thursday by Green Century Capital Management and the not-for-profit **As You Sow**, the Omaha-based packaged food giant received high marks for being a market leader in eliminating BPA, or bisphenol A, from some of its packaging and for investigating replacements to use in the future.

In some scientific studies, BPA — an industrial chemical used in some hard plastics and the linings of cans since the 1960s — has been linked to health problems including cancer and heart disease.

ConAgra doesn't agree with those findings, said Gail Tavill, the company's vice president of sustainable development, but since consumers have taken an interest in the elimination of BPA, the company has taken steps to remove it from its packaging.

Additionally, the Food and Drug Administration has found BPA to be safe using standardized toxicity tests, but is in the process of conducting in-depth studies to "clarify uncertainties about the risks of BPA." Other regulatory agencies in Europe, Australia and Japan, Tavill said, have found that BPA exposure in regulated amounts does not lead to health problems.

"Until a government agency tells us it's not safe, we have to follow the law and be as straightforward as possible," Tavill said.

So far, ConAgra has axed BPA liners from all cans of Hunt's tomato products and is investigating which of its other products would react well with BPA-free can liners. The move is difficult because standard can liners — epoxies that contain BPA — are very versatile, and it takes at least two years to test the durability of BPA-free liners, Tavill said.

Not to mention that the liners react differently to various foods based on variables like acidity, levels of fat and the viscosity of a food or sauce.

Some of the substitutes are polyester-based linings, polyester coatings or plant oil-based linings. Also, some companies including national grocery chain Whole Foods have switched to glass jars or lined cartons instead of cans that have BPA liners.

Over the last two to three years, Tavill said, ConAgra has tested more than 40,000 types of can linings, representing 380 different variables, eight different coating suppliers and four different can suppliers.

Although the initiative is a work-in-progress for ConAgra, which generates 24 percent of its sales from canned items, the company's ranking in this year's Seeking Safer Packaging report was an improvement over last year, when it was given a "D-minus." According to the 2009 report, the poor grade was based on ConAgra not having a plan or timeline to phase out BPA, and for not using BPA alternatives.

The best grade issued in the 2009 report was a "C" for Hain Celestial, a natural and organic food and personal care products company. Heinz, the producer of brands including Heinz ketchup and Smart Ones frozen meals, scored a "C-minus."

Of the other 18 companies included in the report, 13 received failing grades.

“For a company to actually go ahead and package something in a can with a BPA-free liner is great evidence that it's not just talk, that we're really taking steps to meet this consumer interest,” said Teresa Paulsen, a ConAgra spokeswoman.

ConAgra's campaign to remove BPA is similar to the company stance on corn syrup. ConAgra has removed corn syrup from its Hunt's ketchup, even though the company doesn't believe it to be any better or worse than the cane sugar it now uses to sweeten the condiment.

In both cases, consumers made their concerns known and got the changes they wanted, Paulsen said.

Other food manufacturers that were named as “industry leaders” along with ConAgra were Hain Celestial, Heinz and General Mills.

According to the report, ConAgra stood out for being transparent about making major investments in testing viable BPA substitutes.