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Parliamentary questions

E-004538-14

11 April 2014

Question for written answer to the Commission

Rule 117

Sirpa Pietikäinen (PPE)

Subject: Quantities of acetaldehyde in food products

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) announced in 2009 that acetaldehyde in alcoholic beverages was carcinogenic in human beings. On this basis, the Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety (SCCS) set up by the Commission again updated its guidelines on cosmetic products. On the basis of a new unanimous recommendation, a cosmetic end-product is not permitted to contain more than 5 mg of acetaldehyde per litre. No limit has been laid down for foods, although commercial food products such as yoghurts have been shown to contain more than 5 mg of acetaldehyde per litre. Many alcoholic beverages contain levels of acetaldehyde that exceed by a factor of more than 100 the limit which applies to cosmetics.

The EU regulates the use of carcinogenic substances as part, *inter alia*, of legislation on product safety and food products.

The regulation on food products states that food legislation is based on scientific evidence [Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council].

In the light of research which stresses the carcinogenic nature of acetaldehyde, does the Commission intend to set a limit for acetaldehyde in food or alcoholic beverages?

If not, how will the Commission ensure that alcoholic beverages and food products offered for sale in the EU do not contain levels of acetaldehyde which are harmful to consumers?

Answer given by Mr Borg on behalf of the Commission

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Acetaldehyde is included in the Union list of flavourings for use in and on foods(1).

Acetaldehyde is found in alcoholic beverages as a metabolite of ethanol. It is also present in dairy products such as yoghurt. The discovery of acetaldehyde in foodstuffs is not due to recent changes in processes, as acetaldehyde is a well-known natural flavouring agent in such fermented food products. Also many fruits like apples and vegetables like tomatoes contain measurable levels of acetaldehyde. Even if present in many foods, the bioavailability of acetaldehyde is unknown and may or may not be different to the acetaldehyde formed as the main metabolite of alcohol.

The Commission will raise the issue with the competent authorities of the Member States and, if appropriate, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) will be requested to assess the risk for human health related to the presence of acetaldehyde in food as process contaminant or as a natural flavour. Taking into account the outcome of the risk assessment, the appropriateness of setting maximum levels for acetaldehyde in food and alcoholic beverages will be considered.

In accordance with Article 14 of Regulation (EC) 178/2002(2), food that is not safe shall not be placed on the market. Consequently, alcoholic beverages and food products which contain levels of acetaldehyde harmful to consumers shall not be placed on the market or, when already placed on the market, shall be withdrawn from the market.

(1) Regulation (EC) No 1334/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16.12.2008 on flavourings and certain food ingredients with flavouring properties for use in and on foods and amending Council Regulation (EEC) No 1601/91, Regulations (EC) No 2232/96 and (EC) No 110/2008 and Directive 2000/13/EC (OJ L 354, 31.12.2008, p. 34).

(2) Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28.1.2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety. (OJ L 31, 1.2.2002, p. 1).