

Food Making Headlines

Natural labels, trans fats, expiration dates also being reviewed.

Story by

KINDRA GORDON, *field editor*

Food companies are ditching “natural” label. A growing number of food and drink companies are quietly removing natural claims from packages amid lawsuits challenging the naturalness of everything. Natural Goldfish crackers will soon be just Goldfish. Food and drink companies including PepsiCo and Campbell Soup Co. are quietly removing natural claims from packages as well.

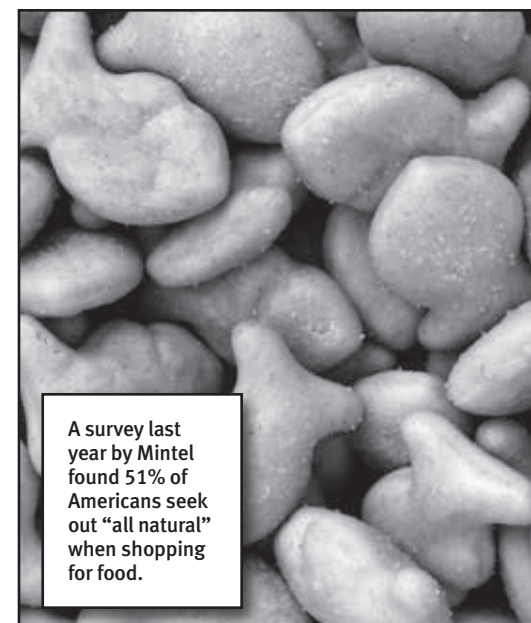
Food labeled “natural” raked in more than \$40 billion in U.S. retail sales during the past 12 months. That is second only to food claiming to be low in fat, according to Nielsen, a global information and measurement company providing market research, insights and data about what people watch and what people buy. A survey last year by Mintel, another market research company, found 51% of Americans seek out “all natural” when shopping for food.

The problem is, natural has no clear meaning. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has no definition, says a spokeswoman, but rather a long-standing policy that it considers natural to mean that “nothing artificial or synthetic (including all color additives regardless of source) has been included in, or has been added to, a food that would not normally be expected to be in the food.”

A “food labeling modernization” bill, introduced in September in Congress, would force the FDA to establish a single, standard nutrition labeling system, including new guidelines for the use of natural.

FDA proposes banning trans fats

On Nov. 7, 2013, the FDA proposed



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banning artificial trans fats in processed food ranging from cookies to frozen pizza, citing the risk of heart disease.

Partially hydrogenated oils, the primary dietary source of the fats, have been shown to raise “bad” cholesterol. Reducing the use of trans fats could prevent 20,000 heart attacks and 7,000 deaths from heart disease a year, says FDA.

According to the Grocery Manufacturers Association, food manufacturers have voluntarily lowered the amounts of trans fats in their food products by more than 73% since 2005, in part by reformulating products. The use of trans fats has declined dramatically since 2006, when the FDA required that trans fat levels be disclosed on package labels. The FDA said the average daily intake of trans fats by Americans fell from 4.6 grams a day in 2003 to 1 gram in 2012.

New York City has already banned the use of trans fats in restaurants, including their use for deep-frying foods, and many restaurants and fast-food chains, including McDonald’s Corp., have eliminated their use. Some European countries have also taken steps. Denmark, Switzerland and Iceland regulate the sale of many foods containing trans fats.

The FDA’s latest proposal is subject to a 60-day public comment period in which food companies are expected to outline how long they expect it to take them to reformulate products.

If the proposal becomes final, partially hydrogenated oils would be considered food additives and would not be allowed in food unless authorized by health regulators. The ruling would not affect trans fats that occur naturally in small amounts in certain meat and dairy products.

Study questions expiration dates

A recent study by Harvard Law School’s Food Law and Policy Clinic and the Natural Resource’s Defense Council has called into validity the expiration dates printed on foods.

“The dates are undefined in law

and have nothing to do with safety,” said Emily Broad Leib, lead author of the study. “They are just a manufacturer suggestion of peak quality.”

Leib researched how manufacturers set the dates on their food products, discovering that some manufacturers conduct taste tests that will factor into the expiration date.

The study looked at rates of waste,

finding that 90% of consumers throw food away on the sell-by date. Leib said consumers are unaware that these dates are not necessarily linked with food safety. As a result, about 160 billion tons of food is wasted every year.

Harvard researchers propose a need for standardization of food expiration labels across the country. “We are pushing for a coherent, reliable and consistent system

for consumers that can help them really understand what the dates mean,” Leib said. This suggests a change could be coming in the use of these labels.



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.*



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