

## From Washington

# Hearing on tropical fats

Richard J. Ronk, acting director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, told a House agricultural subcommittee considering labeling regulations for tropical fats that the "so-called tropical oils cannot be classified together on the basis of their effects on blood lipids." The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) spokesman and others gave testimony Sept. 10, 1987, on the possible ramifications of House Resolution 2148, a bill proposed by Congressman Dan Glickman that would require all tropical oils to be labeled as saturated fats.

In his testimony before the Wheat, Soybeans and Feed Grains Subcommittee, Ronk added that it would be overly simplistic to assume that any vegetable product containing a saturated fat in any amount would have an adverse consequence on blood cholesterol. Citing research published in the *Journal of Lipid Research*, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Nutrition Reviews*, Ronk said, "One recent study suggests that palm oil, even when fed at the high level of 40% of total calories, had much less effect on

plasma cholesterol compared to coconut oil. The recent article on palm oil in *Nutrition Reviews* states, "The animal experiments and human studies mentioned here clearly indicate that palm oil, although it contains some 50% saturated fatty acids, does not behave as a saturated oil." Ronk stressed the need for more research before the relative effects of different fats and oils on blood lipids could be determined.

Ronk also noted that petitions from the American Soybean Association (ASA) and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) requiring mandatory disclosure of the presence of palm oil, palm kernel oil and coconut oil raise "an important issue with possible public health implications that is worthy of serious consideration." However, he also said that the "question on the possible impact of more specific labeling for the so-called tropical oils on domestically produced oils is generally beyond our responsibilities." Details: *Food Chemical News*, Sept. 14, 1987, pp. 33-34.

The Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia (PORIM), in cooperation with edible oil producers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), testified in opposition to the bill. According to a special report from the National Institute of Oilseed Products (NIOP), PORIM said the legislation would protect U.S. industry by forcing a non-tariff barrier on imported oil and also ignores research findings on palm oil. Kurt Berger, a PORIM representative, supported disclosure of total grams of any type of fat or oil on a food label. However, he said, the bill is protectionist because it would require that tropical oils be listed as the only saturated fats in ingredients listed on labels.

ASA testified that tropical oils were hiding behind "the good name of vegetable oils and that vegetable oils are very low in saturated fat and high in blood cholesterol-lowering polyunsaturated fats," the report said.

The National Sunflower Association (NSA), the National Cotton Council (NCC) and CSPI also presented their views to the subcommittee.

## Dietary fats symposium

The Northeast Section of the American Oil Chemists' Society will sponsor an all-day symposium on dietary fats on Dec. 1, 1987, at the Holiday Inn Jetport, Routes 1 and 9 South, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The symposium will feature the following presentations:

- How Fats and Oils are Made: A Processing Primer, by M. Deborah Meiners, Best Foods;
- What Are We Eating? by Robert Rizek, Human Nutrition Information Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture;
- Obesity, by Steven Heymsfield, St. Lukes-Roosevelt Hospital Center, Columbia, University;
- Cancer, by David Kritchevsky, Wistar Institute;
- Cholesterol and Heart Disease, by Margaret Cobb, Rockefeller University;
- Summary (including comments on fish and olive oils), by Mark A. Bieber, Best Foods.

Bieber is serving as general chair for the symposium, geared for dietitians, nutritionists, allied health professionals and anyone interested in fats and oils.

Cost is \$50 for reservations made by Nov. 25, 1987; after that date, the fee rises to \$60. For reservations, contact Mark A. Bieber, Best Foods, 1120 Commerce Ave., Union, NJ 07083, telephone 201-688-9000.

## Labeling plan draws criticism

The American Soybean Association's (ASA) proposal that all foods containing imported tropical oil be labeled specifically for that content has drawn criticisms from groups such as the National Institute of Oilseed Products (NIOP) claiming that the measure is protectionist. NIOP has sent a letter to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Energy and Commerce Committee of the U.S. Congress stating that ASA's proposal is based on trade protectionism rather than food safety.

NIOP contended that ASA's petition proposing the prohibition of "vegetable oil" classification for all tropical oils "goes beyond truth and labeling." It said NIOP's members "strongly oppose labeling require-

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ments that result in trade restraint and that are proposed in the spirit of protectionism." Details: *Food Chemical News*, Sept. 7, 1987, p. 24.

Meanwhile, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei have threatened to restrict U.S. soybean imports if Congress does enact the labeling legislation. According to the Sept. 4 *Washington Correspondence*, a NIOP publication, retaliation could affect up to \$70 million worth of U.S. soybean exports.

The ASA has responded by saying that it will not be intimidated by threats from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as retaliation against U.S. efforts to gain better consumer labeling for fats and oils.

"Clearly, this is a consumer issue and not a trade issue as the producers of tropical fats are trying to portray," Wayne Bennett, ASA president, said. Bennett said the ASEAN nations had no ground for retaliation because ASA had not called for any kind of restriction on imports of palm, palm kernel or coconut oils. "What ASA and other consumer, commodity and health organizations have done is to bring to the attention of U.S. consumers the need for more specific labeling that would identify use of highly saturated tropical fats in food products," he added.

In addition to threatening to cut soybean imports, the Malaysian government has hired the New York-based public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton Inc. to counter ASA claims. Recent reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture have indicated that the Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia has contracted for research from scientists at several U.S. universities to investigate the nutritional value of palm oil. The Philippines coconut industry likewise has established a research agreement with U.S. researchers. A team from Harvard University is to study the nutritional/medical usage of coconut oil's medium-chain fatty acids, *The Cocomunity* newsletter said.

ASA's campaign already has resulted in a decrease in Philippine coconut exports to the U.S., according to Jose Romero Jr., chairman of the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA), who spoke at the 24th COCOTECH meeting held earlier this year in Bali. "This is significant because edible oil products account for 45% of total Philippine coconut exports to the U.S., roughly 159,000 metric tons (MT) or a staggering US \$57,240,000."

Romero said the PCA was considering countermeasures to the ASA campaign. One option would be to organize the Asian Pacific Coconut Community (APCC) against the campaign. "The APCC accounts for over one-fifth of the world's population, more than one billion inhabitants. This a powerful force which even a superpower must listen to," he said. He suggested APCC allocate monies for a coordinated market development program aimed at minimizing future negative campaigns against coconut products.

Another way to insure the survival of the coconut industry is to engage in the downstream production of value-added products, Romero said. He suggested that work be done to increase the world market demand for cocochemicals through promotional activi-

ties and that the use of coconut oil-based derivatives, particularly fatty alcohols, be encouraged in the domestic soap and detergent industry. "Replacing hard alkyl benzene in detergent bar formulation can bring about an immediate increase of local coconut oil usage by at least 44,000 MT per year, not to mention the millions in foreign exchange savings due principally to elimination of imported mineral oil-based products." He also said more work should be done to develop export markets for value-added products such as laundry and toilet soaps. More work also is under way to consider the technical and economic viability of using methyl esters as partial replacements for diesel fuel.

## FDA approves lovastatin

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved lovastatin, a drug developed by Merck & Co. that inhibits the natural production of cholesterol. The drug will be marketed under the name "Mevacor" and should be available in 18 months, according to

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