

Cheese Companies Work Proactively On Sodium Challenges; Walmart Seeks Less Salt

Walmart Wants Less Sugar Added To Yogurt, Milk, Less Salt In Cheese Products

Rosemont, IL, and Washington—The Innovation Center for US Dairy last month hosted over a dozen cheese companies united at a Best Practices Task Force meeting to work on proactively addressing the opportunities and challenges associated with reducing the sodium content of cheese products.

The group has been working pre-competitively to improve consumers' health and wellness while maintaining strict expectations for food safety and taste.

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—Andrea Thomas,
Walmart

The group rallied around three key points related to the challenge of sodium levels in cheese products: maintaining taste and functionality in lower-sodium products; updating process controls in manufacturing; and educating key audiences about the necessary role of sodium in cheese, in terms of the cheesemaking process and food safety/shelf stability.

“Cheese contributes a relatively small amount of sodium to Americans' diets, less than 8 percent; however, industry is steadfast in its commitment to being part of the solution to lowering sodium levels in the diet. Innovation efforts are under

way that help the industry control and lower sodium,” said Nigel Kirtley, vice president cheese research, development and quality for Kraft Foods and member of the health and wellness subcommittee for the Innovation Center for US Dairy.

“It should not be overlooked that cheese is a nutritious food that contributes calcium, protein, phosphorus and vitamin A to the diet, and it is a nice complement to other food groups that Americans need to be eating more of such as whole grains, vegetables and fruit,” Kirtley added.

To date, companies involved in the Best Practices Task Force include: Bongards, Chr. Hansen, Cargill, Dairy Farmers of America, Davisco Foods, Foremost Farms, Glanbia, Great Lakes Cheese, Kraft Foods, Kroger, Lactalis, Land O'Lakes, Leprino, Marathon Cheese, Sargento, Schreiber Foods and V&V Supremo Foods.

Also, academic researchers from Utah State University, the University of Wisconsin's Center for Dairy Research and Food Research Institute, California Polytechnic State University and representatives from the International Dairy Foods Association and US Dairy Export Council also participated.

The group will continue to work together to address three areas: ensuring food safety, education outreach and process control.

Meanwhile, at an event Thursday in Washington, DC, Walmart unveiled a comprehensive effort to provide its customers with healthier and more affordable food choices.

Among the five key elements of the program: reformulating thousands of packaged food items by 2015 by reducing sodium 25 percent and

added sugars 10 percent, and by removing all remaining industrially produced trans fat.

Walmart will reformulate key categories of its Great Value private brand and collaborate with suppliers to reformulate national brands within the same categories by 2015. The effort is designed to help reduce the consumption of sodium, sugar and trans fat.

Key sodium categories include such dairy items as processed cheese, cottage cheese, semi- and hard cheese and egg substitutes. Other categories include packaged prepared foods such as frozen entrees, pizza, frozen vegetables in sauce, and boxed dinners; snacks such as potato chips and cheese puffs; and sauces and condiments such as salad dressings and pasta sauce.

Walmart defines added sugars as sugars and syrups that are added to foods during processing or preparation; added sugars do not include naturally occurring sugars such as those that occur in milk. Targeted added sugar categories include dairy products such as yogurt, flavored milk and pudding.

For sodium and added sugars, as well as industrially produced trans fat (partially hydrogenated fats and oils), suppliers will be asked to voluntarily fill out a scorecard annually

so that Walmart can assess and report its progress toward its target.

“With more than 140 million customer visits each week, Walmart is uniquely positioned to make a difference by making food healthier and more affordable to everyone,” said Bill Simon, president and CEO of Walmart US. “We are committed to working with suppliers, government and non-governmental organizations to provide solutions that help Americans eat healthier and live a better life.”

“Our customers tell us they want a variety of food choices and need help feeding their families healthier foods. At Walmart, we are committed to doing both,” said Andrea Thomas, senior vice president of sustainability at Walmart.

“We support consumer choice so this is not about telling people what they should eat,” Thomas added. “Our customers understand that products like cookies and ice cream are meant to be an indulgent treat. This effort is aimed at eliminating sodium, sugar and trans fat in products where they are not really needed.”

Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, applauded Walmart “for moving the food industry in a healthier direction.” **FR**