

CHEESE MARKET NEWS[®]

The Weekly Newspaper Of The Nation's Cheese And Dairy/Deli Business

Dairy takes proactive approach in sodium reduction discussion

FDA extends comment period on sodium reduction to Jan. 27

By Alyssa Sowerwine

WASHINGTON—As the United States continues to grapple with an overweight population, much of the recent dialogue has focused on sodium intake concerns, and the dairy industry is taking a proactive approach by educating government officials and the population on dairy's role in a healthy diet and industry efforts to limit sodium in product formulations.

"Sodium is a really hot topic," says Greg Miller, president of the Dairy Research Institute (DRI) and executive vice president of research, regulatory and scientific affairs for the National Dairy Council. "Much

of what's driving the discussion are recommendations from public health folks to reduce sodium in the food supply."

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend limiting dietary sodium intake to 2,300 milligrams per day for the general public. For those with hypertension and high blood pressure, the guidelines recommend limiting sodium intake to just 1,500 milligrams per day. However, the current intake for the average person is more likely close to 3,500 milligrams per day, Miller notes.

Due to the higher than recommended consumption levels, groups such as the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the American Public Health Association (APHA) don't think the Dietary Guidelines recommendations go far enough.

Recommendations issued by IOM in April 2010 suggest a mandatory regulatory and mandatory strategy of lowering the sodium levels in foods in steps to allow consumer tastes to adjust to lower levels of salt and sodium in products over time. The IOM report was requested by Congress and sponsored by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC);

FDA; National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute; and Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

"Regulatory action is necessary because four decades of public education campaigns about the dangers of excess salt and voluntary sodium cutting efforts by the food industry have generally failed to make a dent in Americans' intakes," IOM says. "The industry's voluntary efforts have fallen short because of lack of a level playing field for all products."

Meanwhile, APHA last month approved a resolution urging FDA within one year to either remove or modify the generally recognized as safe (GRAS) status of sodium, begin regulating the amount of sodium permitted in processed foods and establish a schedule for the progressive lowering of sodium in food products in the next 10 years.

"Gradually reducing the amount of sodium added in the manufacturing and commercial preparation of food is a prudent and safe public health intervention, and the single most effective means of

reducing the sodium intake of Americans," says the resolution approved by APHA.

"There is an urgent need for rapid, effective actions by the food industry and by the FDA," the resolution says. "Without a decrease of at least 75 percent in the sodium content of processed and restaurant foods, it will be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for most Americans to consume no more than 1,500 milligrams of sodium daily."

Federal agencies such as FDA and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) are responding to these concerns and currently are seeking comments from interested stakeholders on sodium reduction data and other related information.

Specifically, FDA and FSIS are seeking information on research, data and other information that will better inform the agencies about current and emerging practices by the private sector regarding sodium reduction in foods; current consumer understanding of the role of sodium in hypertension and other chronic illnesses; sodium consumption practices; motivation and barriers in reducing sodium in consumers'

Turn to SODIUM, page 10 ⇨

NEWS/BUSINESS



SODIUM

Continued from page 1

food intakes; and issues associated with the development of targets for sodium reduction in foods to promote reduction in excess sodium intake.

The agencies, in a Federal Register announcement Wednesday say they are extending the deadline for the submission of comments, which originally was Tuesday, to Jan. 27. Comments can be submitted electronically at www.regulations.gov.

The International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) and other industry stakeholders say they plan to submit written comments on sodium reduction.

"The agencies know there are no easy solutions, and we want to reinforce the dairy industry's commitment to pursuing changes on a voluntary basis," says Cary Frye, vice president of regulatory and scientific affairs for IDFA.

In addition, as part of the information gathering process, FDA, FSIS, CDC and USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion and Agricultural Research Service held a public meeting on sodium reduction last month in Silver Spring, Md.

The agencies say the meeting — which drew more than 300 participants including representatives from the food industry, food scientists, researchers,

public health workers and government officials — was held in order to gain an informed perspective of the challenges and opportunities related to reducing sodium levels in the American diet.

IDFA's Frye was one of 16 speakers to present oral comments at the meeting. She began by noting that milk, yogurt and ice cream have naturally low levels of sodium but that salt is an integral part of the cheesemaking process.

However, cheese accounts for only 7.8 percent of the sodium in the diet, Frye adds. At the same time, cheese provides an important source of key nutrients including 21 percent of calcium, 11 percent of phosphorus and 9 percent of protein and vitamin A in today's diet, she says.

Frye highlighted industry successes in sodium reduction, such as new offerings of natural cheese at retail with 25 percent less sodium and reduced-fat, lower-sodium processed cheese for commodity purchase for school meals.

However, Frye also emphasized that flavor, functionality and safety challenges remain for other natural and process cheeses.

"Salt is a necessary ingredient in natural cheese not just for flavor but also acting as a preservative," she says.

Other food industry presenters at the meeting included representatives from the National Restaurant Association, Grocery Manufacturers Association,

Kraft Foods, Walmart and McDonald's.

In comments presented at the meeting, Joan McGlockton, vice president of food policy for the National Restaurant Association, said that a flexible, voluntary approach is the best way to reduce sodium consumption in the United States.

"An effective approach to reducing sodium must be voluntary, incremental, flexible and take into account the eating preferences of consumers, the formidable technological challenges and the multiple uses of sodium in the food supply," McGlockton says. "We oppose regulatory mandates or targets that prescribe a specific level of sodium per food item as unrealistic and unnecessary."

Frye and fellow meeting attendee Michelle Matto, IDFA's nutrition and labeling consultant, also attended two of the four breakout sessions held at the meeting, which focused on technical challenges of reducing sodium in processed foods, ways to monitor the sodium intake of consumers, how stakeholders can meet voluntary targets without federal requirements and how best to communicate to consumers.

"The wide variety of presentations and comments made during breakout sessions demonstrated just how hugely complex this issue is, especially from a scientific point of view," Frye says.

Morton Satin, vice president of research at the Salt Institute, says salt has become a "red herring" in heart disease prevention and says calls to regulate it are not based on sound science.

While Satin agrees that reducing high blood pressure is important for health, he says there are better ways to do it than cutting out salt.

He cites a meta-analysis of data from more than 167 studies of people with normal or high blood pressure who were randomly assigned to eat either high- or low-sodium diets. The analysis was recently published in the *American Journal of Hypertension*.

According to Satin, the analysis found that eating less than 2,800 milligrams of sodium a day helped lower blood pressure. However, the reductions were small, and cutting back on salt had other effects, such as an average 2.5-percent increase in cholesterol and 7-percent increase in bad blood fats, called triglycerides, compared to people eating

more than 3,450 milligrams of sodium.

"Trading a minor reduction in one risk factor for a torrent of other serious risk factors is an imbecile's bargain," Satin says. "Population-wide salt reduction is proving to be one of the biggest deceptions in modern public health."

Some lawmakers also have raised concerns with drastic measures to reduce sodium consumption.

In a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg dated Oct. 31, Jack Kingston, R-Ga., notes that "while I support the encouragement of personally monitoring salt intake, I am concerned that these decisions are being made in the context of extensive regulatory overreach across the board. I strongly encourage the department to ensure its efforts are prudent and clearly grounded in solid, scientific-based evidence."

National Dairy Council's Miller notes that whether or not the Dietary Guidelines recommendation of 1,500 milligrams of sodium per day is too high or too low, "that's the recommendation that's out there, and you have to live by it. But we're trying to show the industry what you can do to lower sodium levels in products without compromising quality and flavor."

He notes that the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy is working with DRI and other experts across the industry to share the most current research that addresses emerging issues and opportunities for cheese.

"Through this pre-competitive industry collaboration, best practices for reducing salt in the cheesemaking process are being defined," he says.

Miller notes that the Innovation Center recently completed a comprehensive audit of cheese products in the market, which identified significant variability in the amount of sodium content in commercially available cheeses.

"Reducing this variability can lead to more effective efforts to reduce the sodium content of cheeses in the market," he says.

But he and others, like Frye, caution against an across-the-board, mandatory reduction of sodium content in foods.

"I think we as an industry need to do a better job of educating health professionals on a total diet approach," Miller says. CMN