



**Submission to the
Senate Community Affairs Committee
on the
Food Standards Amendment (Truth in
Labelling - Palm Oil) Bill 2009**

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ABOUT CHOICE

CHOICE exists to unlock the power of consumers. Our vision is for Australians to be the most savvy and active consumers in the world.

As a social enterprise we do this by providing clear information, advice and support on consumer goods and services; by taking action with consumers against bad practice wherever it may exist; and by fearlessly speaking out to promote consumers' interests - ensuring the consumer voice is heard clearly, loudly and cogently in corporations and in governments.

General comments

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the following comments to the Senate Community Affairs Committee on the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling - Palm Oil) Bill 2009.

CHOICE supports consumers having accurate information about the ingredients in their food and for it to be produced sustainably.

The use of palm oil in food presents two issues:

1. Palm oil is high in saturated fat. Eating too much saturated fat increases the risk of heart disease¹. The Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults² advises that saturated fats (including palm oil) be limited and replaced with unsaturated vegetable oils. The Heart Foundation advises that palm oil is too high in saturated fats to be recommended¹.
2. There is now growing concern about the environmental and ecological impact of palm oil production for use in food but also as a biofuel. Demand for palm oil can result in deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia³ and loss of native habitat for animals such as orang-utans and Sumatran tigers⁴.

¹ Heart Foundation. (2009), Q&A Dietary fats, dietary cholesterol and heart health, <http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/sites/HealthyEating/SiteCollectionDocuments/DietaryFats%20QA.pdf>, accessed 12/4/10.

² National Health and Medical Research Council. (2003), *Food for Health: Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults*. Commonwealth of Australia.

³ Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, Factsheet: Palm Oil, <http://www.rspo.org/files/pdf/Factsheet-RSPO-AboutPalmOil.pdf>. Accessed 12/4/2010.

⁴ Centre for Science in the Public Interest. (2005), *Cruel Oil: How palm oil harms health, rainforest and wildlife*. <http://www.cspinet.org/palm/PalmOilReport.pdf>, accessed 12/4/2010.



The role of food labelling

With rates of overweight and obesity rising in Australia, and increasing the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, type-2 diabetes and some cancers, consumers are being encouraged to make healthier food choices. Food labelling helps consumers to make healthy choices. Ingredients lists allow consumers to see what's in their foods and nutrition information panels tell us how healthy or unhealthy it is.

Consumers are also becoming more interested in how their food is produced. Many are seeking organic or free range products because of concerns about animal welfare and/or the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides. Food labelling assists them to identify foods that have been produced in this way.

Consumer interest in palm oil is apparent given the support for campaigns such as the Taronga Zoo Palm Oil Petition, which has almost 2,000 signatories.⁵ Food labelling could assist consumers to easily identify those products containing palm oil by highlighting it's presence in the ingredients list. Third-party accreditation schemes with strict verification requirements and transparent processes could also be used to highlight products made from sustainably sourced palm oil.

CHOICE will also raise the need for palm oil labelling as part of the current review of food labelling laws and policy. The objectives of food regulation outlined in Section 18 of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991 are as follows:

- a) the protection of public health and safety,
- b) the provision of adequate information relating to food to enable consumers to make informed choices, and
- c) the prevention of misleading and deceptive conduct.

CHOICE believes that these objectives give Food Standards Australia New Zealand the responsibility to develop food labelling laws that provide consumers with information they need not only to make healthy choices but informed choices about how and where food has been produced and what is in their food.

Closing remarks

CHOICE believes food manufacturers should seek alternatives to palm oil and that it needn't be used in many cases. In bakery goods for example, Unilever and Goodman Fielder both supply a range of industrial margarines that are free from trans fats and palm oil. Manufacturers always used margarine before palm oil became so plentiful and cheap.

However, where palm oil is used, it should be:

- sustainably sourced, and
- declared in the ingredients list.

⁵ Taronga Conservation Society Australia. (2010), Don't Palm Us Off! Petition, <http://petition.taronga.org.au/palmoil> (accessed 23/4/10)



This would help consumers to exercise their right to avoid foods that contain unhealthy and unsustainable palm oil.

Once again, CHOICE supports this move to provide consumers with information about the use of palm oil in food and welcomes the opportunity to provide these comments. While not within the scope of this current Bill, we believe that there would be merit in providing similar consumer information on cosmetic products.