

Clr Lara Symkowiak

19 April 2010

Submission - RE: Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009

Dear Senate Committee on Community Affairs,

I strongly support the mandatory labelling of palm oil on all consumer goods in Australia.

I support this proposed Bill for the following reasons:

1. Australian consumers deserve to have clear, accurate information about the inclusion of palm oils in food, for both health and conservation reasons.

Approximately 40% of food products on our supermarket shelves contain palm oil. Manufacturers are currently allowed to label palm oil as “vegetable oil” on product ingredients list. This is very misleading. Palm oil in fact originates from a fruit and is high in saturated fats. To label palm oil as a vegetable oil is very deceiving and inaccurate. Australian consumers deserve the right to easily identify palm oil in their food so they can make an informed choice about what they are purchasing. On average, Australians unsuspectingly consumer 10kg of palm oil a year. Improved and transparent labelling will assist consumers in making informed decisions about what they are purchasing, if only to reduce the saturated fats they are consuming.

Most of the world’s palm oil production comes from Malaysia and Indonesia. In South East Asia alone, the equivalent to 300 soccer fields are deforested every hour for palm oil production. This costs the lives of up to 50 Orang-utans every week. Already, over 90% of the Orang-utan’s habitat has been lost. Orang-utans are highly intelligent animals, with well-developed family structures and the ability to communicate their feelings. They share 97% of their DNA with humans and are our closest connection to the animal kingdom. Destruction of their habitat on such a large scale in an unsustainable manner is disgraceful. With clearer labelling, Australians can make the decision whether or not to consume a product that has cost the lives of so many beautiful creatures, such as the Orang-utan. If demand for products with palm oil decreases, so too will the need to deforest large parts of South East Asia in such an unsustainable manner.

2. This Bill will encourage the use of certified sustainable palm oil in order to promote the protection of wildlife, particularly Orang-Utans.

Palm oil can be produced sustainably. The international Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) has set out criteria to measure sustainable palm oil production. The criteria includes transparency, compliance with local, national and internationally ratified laws and regulations, use of best practices by growers and millers, environmental responsibility, appropriate work labour laws and development of new plantings. The RSPO is a not-for-profit association that includes stakeholders from seven sectors of the palm oil industry:

- Palm oil producers
- Palm oil processors or traders
- Consumer goods manufacturers
- Retailers
- Banks and investors
- Environmental/nature conservation NGOs
- Social/development NGOs

When consumers buy a product labelled “contains certified sustainable palm oil” they can be confident that the palm oil production has met rigorous sustainability standards as set out and monitored by the RSPO.

If consumers would like to purchase products that contain palm oil, they should be able to have the choice to choose one that produced the palm oil sustainably, with minimal impacts to the environment and no impact on wildlife habitat.

With clearer labelling, consumers can actively and effectively drive a market for proper certified sustainable palm oil, because they will be demanding manufacturers change their habits through the power of their purchasing dollar.

Conclusion

At present, Australian consumers cannot clearly recognise if palm oil is in the food they are purchasing. Current palm oil production results in the devastating loss of the Orang-utans’ habitat. Palm oil can be produced sustainably under criteria set out by the RSPO. With accurate labelling through this proposed Bill, consumers will be able to choose if they purchase products with palm oil in them or not. This will drive the creation of a certified sustainable palm oil market, as was seen through Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance products.

Australian consumers deserve the right to have the contents of their products accurately labelled in order to make informed decisions about their purchases.