

Dispatches from EUSTAS stevia symposium

German-speaking countries show huge stevia interest

By Jess Halliday, 08-Jul-2009

Interest in stevia has remained high in Germany despite the plant being outlawed under novel foods regulations in 2000; but fringe products may contain undeclared additives due to the lack of food checks.

As stevia did not have a substantial history of consumption in the EU prior to 1997 it was disallowed under novel foods regulations, as of 2000. Prior to that, the plant had garnered considerable consumer and media interest, partly for its sweetening capabilities and partly for its low impact on the glycaemic index, which is of interest to diabetics.

The ban was enforced vigorously in 2000, according to Peter Grosser of MedHerbs, who is also responsible for regulatory affairs at the European Stevia Association (EUSTAS), with companies reporting police raids and seizures of their material.

But Grosser shared EUSTAS website statistics with delegates at the stevia symposium in Leuven, Belgium last week. The site attracts some 2500 visitors each month, from 88 countries – but 38 per cent of visitors are located in German-speaking countries (Germany and Austria).

He said that prohibition has done little to dent consumer confidence, and about ten tonnes of dried leaves and six tonnes of steviol glycosides are imported each year. These are used in products that can be consumed, but which are not explicitly labelled as food.

The trouble is that since no food checks take place in these fringe products, some problems can occur, *“such as additives not being declared and specifications being incorrect”*.

Wanted: safe stevia

Grosser said that in 2007 German speakers were asked about their future expectations regarding stevia.

Forty per cent of respondents said they wanted high quality, safe stevia; 28 per cent said they wanted it to taste like sugar; 17 per cent were diabetics.

Fifteen per cent said they wanted stevia to be approved.

Regulatory approval sought

MedHerbs has filed for novel foods approval for the leaves of the stevia plant, and EUSTAS and others have petitioned the European Food Safety Authority for an opinion on steviol glycosides, crucial for EU approval to be granted.

If MedHerbs' application is approved, it will apply only to that company's products in the EU. Others would have to go through a simplified procedure, requiring only notification to a national food assessment body that they are substantially equivalent in terms of composition, nutritional value, metabolism, intended use and level of undesirable substances.

Switzerland

In Switzerland, which borders Germany and Austria, steviol glycosides at 95 per cent purity were approved last year, following the JECFA positive safety view (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives). Industry insiders have said this was an unusual move for Switzerland, which tends to grant approval for ingredients only in the wake of EFSA opinions.

Every product containing steviol glycosides must seek individual approval before being launched on the market, however.

EUSTAS prepares quality assurance scheme for stevia

By Jess Halliday, 07-Jul-2009

The European Stevia Association (EUSTAS) is proposing a quality assurance scheme for raw stevia products in Europe, to guarantee purity and quality and build consumer confidence.

Stevia is expected to gain approval in the EU in 2010. The European Food Safety Authority is currently preparing its opinion on steviol glycosides following petitions from EUSTAS and others; novel foods approval for the dried leaves is also being sought in Germany.

In advance of the regulatory green lights, EUSTAS is developing a scheme that would allow suppliers to use a certification mark on their material – and those processing or distributing it – subject to a control procedure and contract.

MedHerbs CEO Peter Grosser, who also handles regulatory affairs for EUSTAS, told delegates at last week's stevia symposium in Leuven that approval for steviol glycosides in Europe will only be for purity levels in excess of 95 per cent, as per the JECFA level.

"Who is to check and guarantee adherence to this limit? The national authorities responsible for the evaluation and control of foodstuffs are only capable of analysing the quantity of individual steviol glycosides in an end product, like jam," he said.

"But no analytical laboratory can state what levels of purity and contamination and what microbiological rating the steviol glycosides used, have in a finished product."

For this reason he is proposing an independent control system to guarantee the purity and quality of raw stevia products.

In addition, quality control for the sweetener would breed consumer trust – and the processing industry would be able to order checked products, thus giving producers a competitive advantage.

The scheme

Grosser told FoodNavigator.com that more discussions are needed on a quality certification system, but a logo has been devised, based on EUSTAS' logo.

The priority is for steviol glycosides at the moment, but that a parallel scheme for the dried leaves, used primarily as an additive in tea mixtures, is also on the cards. Indeed the system that has been devised would be applicable to both. The common areas are: scope of application; quality standards; methods of verification; control procedure; legally binding contracts; awarding of certification mark; penalties in cases of breach; and costs.

It is envisaged that a 12-month, internationally binding contract be signed by EUSTAS and the producer – including a nondisclosure agreement to protect confidentiality.

The costs for implementing the quality control system would be covered by the applicant/licensee, and an annual fee would cover inspection costs and surveying. A further amount linked to production capacity would cover costs of ongoing controls and analysis for monitoring quality standards.

Grosser emphasised that EUSTAS is a non-profit organisation. *"It is not the aim to enrich ourselves,"* he said, but added that acceptable fees to cover the costs would have to be decided upon.