

## Omega-3: Industry action could prompt policy change

By Lorraine Heller

15-Oct-2008 - **Getting omega-3 into the UK diet may require a level of 'reverse policy', or making the moves before the policy is adopted, a nutrition expert has suggested.**

Jack Winkler, professor of nutrition policy at London Metropolitan University, told NutraIngredients.com that the greatest momentum for change in omega-3 consumption is coming from sources external to the government, which opens a window of opportunity above a closed door.

Reverse policy essentially occurs when interested parties take initiative in the absence of official action. If the outcome is positive, it is subsequently 'blessed' by government, which institutionalizes the solution that has been achieved.

### Taking initiative

Possibly the best example of this in the food industry is when two leading UK supermarkets – Tesco and Sainsbury's – took the leap in the mid 1980s to implement nutritional labelling.

The move came at a time when it was clear that bad eating was leading to bad health, but no one had decided on a way to communicate this to the public.

Only after the two retailers started labelling the salt and sugar content of all the products on their shelves – prompting some interested food manufacturers to do the same on their products – did the government eventually sanctify nutrition labelling by writing it into official policy.

According to Professor Winkler, the same process holds potential for getting people to consume omega-3, which has been linked to so many health benefits that it is only half-jokingly referred to as 'omnipotent', but which has nonetheless not prompted any organised or consistent action from regulators.

*"In normal political theory, the government is the aggravator of interests – it works out a tolerable compromise between the contending parties and passes it as law. In the nutrition labelling case, they didn't do that. They effectively allowed various interested groups to work out the compromise for themselves,"* he said.

### Reverse policy catalysts

He explained that there are three main candidates pushing the reverse policy process in the case of omega-3: Consumers, conditions and the food industry.

There is now a substantial level of consumer awareness and acceptance for the healthy fatty acids, which has prompted innovation and product development from industry. This has led to a flow of omega-3-fortified products appearing on the international marketplace, with the application range also fast expanding.

Technological developments that protect the lipid's healthy profile while masking its fishy off-taste mean that omega-3s can now be added to almost every type of product, including dairy, confectionery, bakery and beverage items, as well as processed meats and fish. Fortification can occur in shelf-stable, chilled and frozen forms.

This massive uptake of omega-3 as a functional ingredient is one step towards the reverse policy process, said Professor Winkler.

Other examples – which are still in the early stages but hold potential nonetheless – are a growing focus on omega-3 in the medical profession and in the media.

Physicians are starting to give omega-3s to their patients, and this is not restricted to a niche group of 'alternative' actors, said Professor Winkler, giving the example of his local GP who was dispensing prescriptions for one form of the lipid – EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid).

Additionally, national media outlets are giving time and space to omega-3s, which in turn results in more public awareness. Two recent examples include a two-page spread in the Daily Mail on the best omega-3 supplements, and a BBC news slot focus on teaching prisoners to cook – and eat – fish, an idea linked to the behavioural benefits of the ingredient.

### Challenges

However, even though the reverse policy process does hold significant potential, there still remain some challenges to be overcome. These include the fact that not all forms of omega-3 are the same or have the same benefits, as well as a lack of consistent guidance on recommended levels of intake.

This means that consumers assume benefits they may not be receiving, said Professor Winkler. It also means that responsible companies using the right levels and the right kinds of omega-3s in their products remain at a disadvantage, as competitors still get away with cheaper, less effective fortification.

*"We haven't yet reached the stage in the reverse policy process where the interested parties reach a compromise that the government and come and bless," he said.*

*"So we'll either bumble along until the government steps in and puts some rules to the game, or some sort of compromise will emerge within industry."*

Professor Winkler recently addressed attendees at a Food and Behaviour (FAB) research conference held in Oxford earlier this month. To read more on the importance of omega-3 in mood and behaviour, click [here](#).

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