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European Commission ignores scientific evidence, votes to legalise deception of consumers

Despite a petition from twenty of the world's leading nutrition scientists, we understand that the European Commission last Thursday (1 October) voted for scientifically flawed regulations that would allow food and supplement manufacturers to put cheap plant oils in their products and imply that they have the same proven benefits for human health as fish oils.

We understand that there were 48 abstentions, including the UK representative, which gives us hope that common sense will prevail when we take our fight to the European Parliament. MEPs will now have the right to scrutinise the regulations, and we will be asking them not to approve this deception of EU residents.

Professor Jack Winkler, head of the Nutrition Policy Unit and coordinator of the petition comments:

“This is an insult to consumers. It is a defeat for public health. It is also a denial of science.

“Twenty of the world's leading scientists, who specialise in fats, have told them they are wrong. But the Eurocrats have simply disregarded that advice, the best science available.

“Then they claimed that their decision was “based on sound science”. This is hypocrisy. It would be laughable, if the new Regulation were not so damaging.

This is just how the EU goes wrong. It rushes decisions against a ticking clock, then produces flawed legislation.

“This Regulation is a double windfall for companies. Firstly, it allows food manufacturers to cut costs by using inexpensive plant oils instead of real fish oils. Then, by making unsubstantiated but impressive sounding claims, they can charge a higher price for products consumers think will do them good. This is the “health premium”.

“They cut costs and raise prices – great business, facilitated by the European Commission, at consumers’ expense. The winners from this episode are the big European food manufacturers. Was that an accident? Or is it an example of the Commission paying disproportionate attention to the interests of big companies at the expense of consumers?

“We will not give up our campaign to improve this Regulation. Having been approved by Brussels bureaucrats, it now goes to the European Parliament for a three-month scrutiny.

“We will now present good science and common sense to all MEPs, asking them to oppose the Regulation.”

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Notes to editors:

Plant-derived omega-3s are mainly alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). But it is the marine-derived oils, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), that deliver the benefits for cardiovascular and brain functioning. And human beings are very poor converters of ALA into DHA.

The latest official statement on this point, by the International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids (ISSFAL), was published earlier this year as Brenna et al., "Alpha-linolenic acid supplementation and conversion to n-3 long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids in humans", in Prostaglandins, Leukotrienes and Essential Fatty Acids, 80 (2009), 85-91.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19269799?dopt=Abstract>