



Survey Shows Proposed Name Change for High-Fructose Corn Syrup Would Mislead Consumers

WASHINGTON, Nov. 10, 2011 -- Changing the name of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) to "corn sugar" would confuse consumers and thwart food shoppers' attempts to avoid the man-made sweetener, according to a study prepared for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Fully half of consumers surveyed failed to recognize that a product label listing "corn sugar" might in fact contain HFCS. The results confirmed that consumers do not want to eat or drink products made with HFCS and that referring to the sweetener as "corn sugar" would mislead many Americans into believing that these products contain a different ingredient.

The Sugar Association commissioned the face-to-face consumer survey to provide data on the American consumer to the FDA, responding to a proposal by the Corn Refiners Association (CRA) to rebrand HFCS as "corn sugar."

Many consumers read food labels to identify and avoid foods that contain HFCS and, as a result, sales of the sweetener have fallen. In response, the CRA began a \$50 million dollar campaign to promote HFCS as "corn sugar" – an entirely different sweetener (dextrose) – on its websites and in TV advertisements. CRA also petitioned the FDA to remove the "corn sugar" name from the real corn sugar product and transfer it to HFCS. This would enable food companies to remove the "high-fructose corn syrup" name from their ingredient labels and refer instead to "corn sugar."

Consumer research expert Dr. Joel Cohen, who was previously commissioned by the National Cancer Institute to create a survey on consumer understanding of cigarette health risks, designed the Sugar Association study of 610 consumers. The survey examined whether changing the name of HFCS to "corn sugar" would mislead consumers, or instead reduce consumer misperceptions about HFCS, as the corn processors claim in their petition.

"In marketing, product and brand names are powerful tools to convey meaning, which is why millions of dollars are spent trying to find the ideal name to communicate associations and images that transcend product function," Dr. Cohen said in the survey analysis. "This study strongly indicates that, if the ingredient heretofore identified as 'high-fructose corn syrup' were instead identified as 'corn sugar,' a meaningful percentage of food shoppers are likely to be misled into believing that the latter ingredient is something other than high-fructose corn syrup, which many seek to avoid."

The Sugar Association has previously provided evidence to the FDA that renaming HFCS would undo the agency's "well-established sugar/syrup nomenclature system." Allowing the term "corn sugar" on food labels would also violate the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act and could serve as precedent for the rebranding of other controversial ingredients. Most significant, a name change could pose life-threatening risks and confuse consumers with hereditary fructose intolerance as well as endanger the 30 percent of the American population that suffers from fructose malabsorption.

Sugar farmers have argued that permitting the "corn sugar" term would mislead consumers into thinking that HFCS is not present in their food. According to the survey, even when explicitly told that referring to HFCS as

"corn sugar" had no effect on the sweetener in question, 39 percent of consumers still thought the ingredient had changed or were not sure if it had changed.

In addition, when consumers surveyed understood that the "corn sugar" name actually referred to HFCS, their preferences to avoid the ingredient did not significantly change. This showed, according to Dr. Cohen, that "those food shoppers who correctly understand that 'corn sugar' actually refers to the HFCS ingredient will not alter their unfavorable perceptions of the ingredient, resulting in no benefit from the name change to those marketing HFCS."

The survey thus revealed that the problem with HFCS is not its name, but is instead consumer concerns over the ingredient itself. The proposed name change would not alter unfavorable perceptions about HFCS and would rescue sales only by misleading consumers into thinking their foods and beverages contain an entirely different ingredient.

The 610 respondents were surveyed by professionally-trained interviewers in a one-on-one setting in 16 high-traffic shopping malls across the country. Respondents were 51 percent female and 49 percent male and their age distribution closely mirrored U.S. population parameters.

For a copy of the survey report, please contact jwilson@levick.com.