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Allergen Labeling - Latest Developments

2006

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Report Highlights:

Since the UK implemented EU rules on allergen labeling there has been a tendency by suppliers to over-use 'may contain traces of nuts' warnings on packaged food products. The Food Standards Agency has published guidance notes to help the food supply chain improve their labeling advice for the estimated 1.5 million British consumers with allergies. Our stakeholders are requested to review these guidance notes that are available on the Food Standards Agency website page referred to in this report.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
London [UK1]
[UK]

Background

The UK implemented new food labeling rules contained in European Directive (2003/89/EC) on 25 November 2004. The new rules established a list of 12 food allergens. Whenever any of these 12 allergens, or ingredients made from them, is present in pre-packed foods (including alcoholic drinks) the source allergen must be referenced. The list of ingredients affected consists of cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, peanuts, nuts, soybeans, milk, celery, mustard, sesame, and sulphur dioxide at levels above 10mg/kg or 10mg/liter as expressed as SO₂.

Since the regulations have been in force, manufacturers' have been using phrases such as 'may contain traces of nuts' to show that there could be traces of an allergen in a food product - either in the ingredients, or because it has entered the product accidentally during the production process.

It has become evident that there is unnecessary use of 'may contain' labeling, and research by the Food Standards Agency has shown that consumers are concerned and confused. Up to 1.5 million people in the UK have food allergies, and excessive use of warning labels can restrict consumer choice, and devalue the impact of warning labels.

Latest developments

The Food Standards Agency has issued guidance to help food producers and retailers improve their labeling advice for people with allergies. The "Allergen Management and Advisory Labelling Guidance", which is voluntary, uses examples of 'best practice' to help businesses provide appropriate advisory labels that are clearer for consumers to understand.

The guidance can be found at:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/pressreleases/2006/jul/maycontaininguide>

In addition, the Food Standards Agency has announced a consultation period on a draft voluntary guidance document that suggests the best practice for the provision of allergen information for foods that are not pre-packed. (The rules referenced above require the indication of specified allergenic ingredients for foods that have been pre-packed only.) The consultation period on non pre-packed concludes on September 27, 2006.

The Food Standards Agency states that there is evidence from clinical records to suggest that foods sold not pre-packed may pose a greater risk to food-allergic consumers than pre-packed foods. The draft document can be found at:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/Consultations/ukwideconsults/2006/allergeninfoconsult>

Impact on U.S. agricultural trade

The issuance of these guidance notes by the UK's Food Standards Agency is very helpful. They will assist U.S. companies and their UK importers in determining the best approach to complying with the allergen food labeling requirements.