The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Concerns Over Safety of Palm Oil Prompt Legislative Action

By Anastasia Bazenkova

August 09, 2015



Palm oil is widely used in the food industry around the world, mainly as a substitute for milk fats in dairy products.

The destruction of banned Western food imports may be dominating the headlines in Russia, but the debate over another controversial food issue — that of palm oil and its effect on people's health — is also raging on the sidelines.

During the past few weeks, palm oil has been among the most discussed topics in the Russian media and blogosphere, with several high-profile officials speaking out on the subject of this foreign food ingredient.

As Russian cheese production soars in response to the ban on Western food imports, industry analysts say that domestic cheesemakers are increasingly turning to the cheaper option of imported palm oil instead of milk fat, which is expensive and in short supply. In the first two months of this year, the Rosstat government statistics agency reported 37 percent growth

in palm oil imports.

In the first four months of this year, national production of cheese and cheese products jumped by 29 percent compared to the previous year, the same agency reported.

That growth was prompted by a ban on imported cheese from the EU imposed by the Russian government last August in response to Western sanctions against Russia for its role in the Ukraine crisis. Rosstat recorded that in the first quarter of this year, cheese imports were just 38.5 percent of their volume in the same period last year.

Meanwhile, raw milk output grew by just 3 percent.

Lack of Regulation

Palm oil is widely used in the food industry around the world, mainly as a substitute for milk fats in dairy products. The problem with palm oil in Russia, critics say, is that there is no clear regulation of its use in the food industry, which allows the addition of technical-grade oil to food products.

Maria Kozhevnikova, an actress and State Duma deputy for the ruling United Russia party who is waging a long-running battle against palm oil, called in June for a ban on the use of palm oil in food items in Russia.

"There is no regulatory framework in the countries of the Customs Union [that includes Russia] that differentiates between food and technical uses for palm oil and other tropical oils," she told the Moskva 24 television channel.

As a result, a product that should only be used to produce soaps, detergents and paint is being used in food, she said.

Existing Russian technical regulation on palm oil allows a concentration of spoilage that is five times higher than that permitted in most European countries.

Kozhevnikova said that her fellow lawmakers in the Duma would introduce a bill in September that would slash the allowed spoilage concentration in palm oil used in food products by 10 times.

Nikolai Pankov, head of the Duma's agriculture committee, told the Gazeta.ru news site that he would support the initiative.

"Using palm oil, especially the technical kind, without any monitoring worsens the quality of domestic food products and undermines trust in Russian agricultural producers who make quality products," he said.

'Justified Hysteria'

In mid-July, Roscontrol, a prominent nongovernmental group that monitors the quality of food items, checked 40 different domestically produced butters, hard cheeses and cottage cheeses on sale in Russian supermarkets. The group said that in 70 percent of them, the milk fat in them had been replaced by palm oil.

"There is some hysteria right now in society over palm oil, but this hysteria is justified," said Maxim Rudakov, director of the expert department at Roscontrol. "We don't really know what kind of oil is being imported into the country and then used in food production," he said.

Among all the vegetable oils, palm oil is the least healthy as its properties are similar to those of high-melting fats, said dietitian Natalya Fadeyeva.

High-melting fats contain a lot of saturated fatty acids that can lead to atherosclerosis — the accumulation of fatty deposits inside arteries — said Fadeyeva, adding that if consumed in small quantities, palm oil will not have any negative effect on people's health.

"In America they consume twice as much palm oil as in Russia," Fadeyeva said. "The difference is that it's always indicated on the packaging there and its quality is much higher than that used in Russia."

The harm caused by the consumption of such products is not felt immediately, but has a cumulative effect, Rudakov said.

The government has undertaken some preliminary motions to press producers to make it clearer to consumers if they have used palm oil in their products.

While food producers are already required by law to state the ingredients — including palm oil — on their packaging, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said on July 20 that information about the use of palm oil and other vegetable oils should be clear and noticeable.

Producers often don't indicate that their products contain palm oil as they fear losing customers and because the law is not enforced, industry analysts say.

Mislabeling ingredients on food items is punishable by fines of up to one million rubles ($16,000), but producers know such fines are very rarely handed out in Russia, and therefore continue to fill the market with counterfeit products, Rudakov said.

Contact the author at a.bazenkova@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/08/09/russian-concerns-over-safety-of-palm-oil-prompt-legislative-action-a48840