

NHF Counsel's Report

5.5 DAYS IN BEIJING – THE CODEX COMMITTEE ON FOOD ADDITIVES MEETS IN THE IMPERIAL CITY

By Scott C. Tips, General Counsel, NHF

Seventeen hours after the tires of my Air China jet settled comfortably onto the runway at Beijing International Airport, I was sitting at the National Health Federation's place in the 40th Session of the Codex Committee on Food Additives (CCFA) week-long meeting at the Asia Hotel in downtown Beijing on Monday morning, April 21st. The weather had not cooperated as it rained incessantly, making available taxis as scarce as condom dispensers in the Vatican. Nor did it help that I could not speak a word of Mandarin Chinese; English, French, and bad German can only get you so far, even in this international city. But, I made it, sliding into NHF's seat in time to hear CCFA Chairman Dr. Junshi Chen's opening remarks.

The NHF is the only Codex-credited health-freedom organization with the right to attend Codex committee meetings such as this one. In fact, although the NHF has for years been attending many other Codex committee and commission meetings – in Germany, Canada, France, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, and Thailand – this CCFA meeting was the first for us.

In his opening remarks, the Chairman proudly told us that 65 countries and 13 INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations), totaling 262 registered delegates, were in attendance. And of those 65 countries, 13 were there as beneficiaries of the Codex Trust Fund. I could see that the NHF was the only consumer organization in attendance. The rest of the room was filled with government officials, bureaucratic functionaries, and diverse industry representatives. Strange, no other consumer groups were in sight – I was alone in a sea of government-industry group hugs.

Why We Fight

As we have stressed for years, even decades, the artificial sweeteners Aspartame, Neotame, and Sucralose are dangerous food additives that have been shown to harm health. All three have caused adverse events in consumers and are best avoided. Yet, this Committee has seen fit to advance these three substances along the path to approval. Once approved

as Codex food additives, these artificial sweeteners would then be legally adoptable virtually worldwide.

You see, what is not well known – and certainly not well publicized – is the fact that the developing countries of the World are adopting into their own national regulations Codex standards hot off the press. In fact, some of these countries are so eager to adopt Codex food standards that they are not even waiting until the Codex Alimentarius Commission itself approves and adopts the standards – they are adopting the *draft* Codex standards! That is how desperate they are for these standards. Many of these countries are actually required to adopt Codex standards.

So, as soon as these food-additive standards are approved – maybe even before – they will be pressed into national service throughout the World. Codex has a multiplier effect previously unseen on this planet.

Raining on the Parade

The Chairman progressed through the Agenda, wisely resolving issues concerning seaweed and carrageenan as well as vegetable carotenoids. Even the question of lycopene as a food additive was addressed by its being held and not endorsed by the Committee pending clarification by the Milk and Milk Products Committee as to safety concerns. “Whether we endorse or not,” the Chairman intoned, “the real issue is safety.”

But these were small road bumps on the path to approval and CCFA rolled onwards, soon arriving at those issues most important to our members. When the moment arrived, NHF spoke up to oppose the inclusion of Aspartame, Sucralose, Alitame, Neotame, and Aspartame-Acesulfame Salt in the Codex food-additive standards. All of these sweeteners, we argued, were documented as dangerous to human health and have no place in human food.

These comments elicited a strong reaction from Dr. Angelika Tritscher, formerly with Nestle and now the World



Codex Committee on Food Additives Meeting

Health Organization half of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) representatives seated at the head table, who spoke at length about how these sweeteners were only included here because they had already been evaluated for safety and found to be harmless. There is data, she said, for full safety assessment. Then she trotted out the old argument about how every substance is toxic at some level, as if that could mean that we should all sprinkle our foods with lead, if just we were to use the *right* amount.

I asked for the floor again and responded that of course everything from water to food can be toxic at some level but that is not the point here. The point is whether or not these substances are safe at any level, especially Codex levels. We at NHF have found that even as few as two cans of diet soda per day can deliver a toxic amount of these artificial sweeteners. While JECFA may feel that the science is settled, *at best* the science is unsettled.¹ And after having attended numerous CCNFSDU Committee meetings for many years, and now this CCFA meeting for the first time, NHF is amazed that the precautionary principle applied to natural substances such as vitamin-and-mineral food supplements in one Codex committee would not then be applied in this Committee to dangerous, man-made substances. This, I said, is astounding.

JECFA had no response, and the Committee took its late-afternoon break.

The Rain Continues

CCFA soon resumed its meeting with the United States delegate delivering his report of the Electronic Working Group (EWG) on the GSFA (General Standards for Food Additives). Of course, the U.S. delegate conveniently omitted to include in his EWG report the written comments submitted by the NHF last Fall. So, once again, NHF stated its objections to the inclusion of the artificial sweeteners in these Codex standards. These comments fell on seemingly deaf ears, but NHF's remarks about the dangers of aluminum-containing food additives such as aluminum silicate, aluminum ammonium sulphate, calcium aluminum silicate, and sodium aluminosilicate seemed to resonate more fully with the Chairman. In particular, I noted to the Committee that it seemed as if I were transported back 2000 years to Ancient Rome and warning of the dangers of lead in tableware and glasses. Aluminum is our 21st Century health danger and is both cumulative in the body and unnecessary. I suggested that JECFA should carefully review all aluminum additives' safety.

The Chairman noted his own concern about the safety of aluminum and remembered when this same Committee had reviewed aluminum as a food *contaminant*, but added that this agenda item was only at Step 3 of the process. "The idea," he said, "is to put this on the table and ask for comments. We will have more discussions at further steps."

Then, again, another opportunity appeared to state NHF's opposition to including Aspartame, Neotame, and Sucralose as Codex-approved food additives when the representative

for the International Sweeteners Association (ISA) asked the Committee to *increase* the permitted levels of Sucralose in flavored alcoholic drinks and "ready-to-eat savouries." Japan spoke up in support of ISA, while NHF opposed ISA and Japan on this point. After our comments, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Malaysia (really, nothing more than food-and-drug-agency bureaucrats in all four countries) expressed their own support for higher levels of this toxin in our drinks and foods. With such concerted support, the Chairman approved this change.

Aspartame Doomed

Yet, despite these apparent successes by the pro-Aspartame groups, the handwriting is on the wall. Interestingly enough, the Committee is also considering steviol glycosides as food additives (a natural sweetener championed by the delegation of Paraguay). Couple this with Coca-Cola's recent and strong interest in stevia as a sweetener, as well as the growing consumer resistance to Aspartame, and it would be a fairly safe prediction that stevia will eventually replace Aspartame as a sugar substitute. Time will tell; but this would be an encouraging development, especially since the latest research shows that stevia actually has a curative effect on diabetes. When this latter benefit becomes general, accepted knowledge, stevia sales should explode and aspartame sales implode.

Aftermath

Interestingly enough, by the end of the first day's meeting, NHF's strong and divergent remarks had attracted the attention of several persons, including one scientist, who approached me to discuss further our organization and positions on these various issues. And as the week wore on other valuable contacts were made with press and other delegations that bode very well for the future. The NHF certainly made its mark at the meeting.

Moreover, although the NHF attended this meeting primarily to address the artificial-sweetener issues that most interest our members, we may have our greatest impact in helping to remove aluminum from the food-additive list – not at this meeting, but sometime during the next one or two sessions. In the previous CCFA meeting, the Chairman himself – as well as the Committee too – had already expressed interest in transitioning food additives away from aluminum-containing ingredients by 2010; but this fact was ignored by the US-led Electronic Working Group that reported to this 40th session. Strangely enough, the Chairman and NHF have been the only ones to push on this issue during this most recent meeting. Time will tell. As we always have, we can only continue to strive for the best possible outcome. 

References

- 1 In such cases, Codex participants push application of the precautionary principle, which urges that in case of doubt, or mixed results, one should avoid approving a substance for use.