

Submission on the Truth in Labeling (Palm Oil) Bill 2009

Joseph Pulitzer once summed up the essence of the perfect story with these words: “Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.”

As journalists, we are concerned with seeking and reporting the truth. We acknowledge that we live in a country where we can do this with relative ease. But there is a situation in Australia today that is misleading consumers on a daily basis. In fact, every time we visit the supermarket we are being misled by a food labeling loop-hole.

Palm oil production is responsible for mass habitat loss in South East Asia. As the global demand for palm oil grows, consumers are driving this deforestation. In Australia we import 130,000 tonnes of palm oil every year. To satisfy this demand it takes an area the size of 13,000 MCGs per year. That’s a staggering amount of land in South East Asia, much of which is the last remaining rainforest home of Orang-utans, Tigers, Gibbons and Elephants.

The stark reality is that we are all contributing to this crisis every time we do our weekly supermarket shop, but we have no idea we’re doing it. This is because palm oil is often not labeled properly on the ingredients panel of our food products. It’s often hidden under the term ‘vegetable oil’.

When you consider the many different types of vegetable oils – olive, sunflower, canola, grapeseed, pumpkin to name a few – the term vegetable oil is very broad. Simply labeling it ‘vegetable oil’ not only denies us our right to know what we are eating, it denies us the right to know if we are adding to the destruction of rain forests in South East Asia and the possible extinction of many species such as Orang-utans, Gibbons, Elephants and Tigers.

The words in the submission are not beyond the realms of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Act. We are asking for the mandatory labeling of palm oil in our food products so we can make an informed choice. This aligns with section c, 2A of the Act which states that one of the objectives of the Act is *the provision of adequate information relating to food to enable consumers to make informed choices.*

We understand that there is a currently a review of Australian Food Labeling Law and Policy, however, this is an issue for which we do not have the luxury of time. The United Nations says palm oil is the leading cause of rainforest destruction in Indonesia and Malaysia, we have already lost 90 per cent of the Orang-utan’s rainforest home and we may lose the species altogether in the next 10 years. More worryingly, the demand for palm oil is increasing. By 2020 Indonesia’s oil palm plantations are projected to triple in size to by an area the size of England and Wales combined

As journalists and as consumers we fully support the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labeling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009 and ask that you recommend this Bill be passed in full by the Australian Senate.

We are happy to have a representative appear before the Senate Community Affairs Legislative Committee into the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labeling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009 to answer questions in relation to this submission.

Kim Watkins