Put your Studies Where your Mouth is

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By KRYSTAL GABERT, Editor, Food Manufacturing

A Washington Post article *[1]* published Monday reported on the lack of information possessed by federal agencies — the FDA and EPA, specifically — about the potential health and environmental risks posed by the chemicals often found in foods and food packaging. The report was triggered by the recent recall of 28 million packages of Kellogg's cereal due to a contamination of 2-methynaphthalene — a substance believed to be created in this case by incorrect composition of or improper heat application to the adhesive used to attached foil lining to paper bags inside a cereal box — which led to consumer reports of strange odors, nausea and diarrhea.

According to the *Post*, the EPA requested health and safety information about 2-methynaphthalene in 1994 but has yet to receive anything from chemical manufacturers. The article states that the government requires chemical companies to turn over information suggesting that certain chemicals are harmful, creating an environment in which companies are disinclined to do testing for fear of unwanted regulation or bureaucratic entanglements when they uncover unexpectedly negative information. What they don't know won't hurt them... though it could very well hurt consumers.

All of this begs the question: Why is the FDA asking food and chemical companies to conduct these studies? Why aren't there independent tests on these products available to regulatory agencies? Why doesn't the EPA or FDA conduct or commission its own studies? Part of that answer may lie in the sheer number of chemicals on the market — 80,000 — and the *Post* reports that the government "has little to no information" about most of them. Launching and paying for tens of thousands of studies might well take a bit more time and money than the agency has available.

In fact, the *Post* article is littered with mentions of what the FDA doesn't know. It seems the agency doesn't know much. So when considering who's responsible for the control of chemicals found in and around food, the answer seems a little fuzzy. Clearly, a coalition of corporations and regulators should work together to best determine the safety of the various chemicals we come into contact with every day. But regulatory agencies seem to be playing a game of catch-up with 80,000 substances to account for. Food and chemical companies have direct access to these chemicals and it's infinitely easier for those within the industry to test their own chemicals than it is for federal regulators to try to test everything on the market. The alternative to corporate responsibility may well be restrictive regulation.

It's time for chemical companies to begin releasing the results of their internal testing — or begin such tests if they've never been done — even if doing so reveals information about possible harmful effects that will need to be reported to federal agencies. And it's time for food companies to take advantage of the wealth of track-and-trace systems available. I recently visited Whitewave Foods in Mount Crawford, VA. The faciliity is state-of-the art, but the one thing that stood out to me the most was that the company tests every batch it produces and does not release any product until those tests come back clean. While these tests are meant to prevent the possible of foodborne illnesses such as e. coli or salmonella, such a policy would also have prevented products laced with unknown chemicals from being released to market. Holding product on-premises may not be a realistic option for all food producers, but it's one in a wealth of options when working toward a safer food supply.

Last Thursday, the Senate opened hearings into a revamp of the Toxic Substances Control Act, passed in 1976. The industry’s cooperativeness and willingness to police itself in good faith may well impact the restrictiveness of the oversight imposed by this potential legislative overhaul.

For another view on the topic check out Associate Editor Lindsey Coblenz’s column, “FDA: Put Up Or Shut Up [2].”

Who do you think is best poised to oversee the safety of the food supply? What do you think should happen with the Toxic Substances Control Act? Let me know at krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com *[3].*

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