

Battle Over Corn Syrup Heads To Court

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LOS ANGELES (AP) -- The setting sun splashes warm hues across a ripening cornfield as a man and his daughter wander through rows of towering plants.

Like any parent, the dad says in the television commercial, he was concerned about high fructose corn syrup. But medical and nutrition experts reassured him that in essence, it's the same as cane sugar.

"Your body can't tell the difference," he says. "Sugar is sugar."

That key claim, made last year by the corn industry as it tries to rebrand high fructose corn syrup as simply "corn sugar," is due to be considered by a federal judge Tuesday after a group of sugar farmers and refiners sued corn processors and a lobbying group.

The sugar groups say the father-in-the-cornfield advertisement and other national television, print and online commercials from the corn industry amount to false advertising because sugar is not the same as high fructose corn syrup, the sweetening agent now found in the bulk of sodas and processed foods.

"It is not natural, it does not exist in nature," said Adam Fox, an attorney for the sugar industry. "Sugar comes from cane and beet, high fructose corn syrup requires advanced technology."

High fructose corn syrup's image has suffered in recent years after some studies suggested a link between the product and the nation's rising levels of obesity. Americans have increasingly been blaming the syrup for a range of health problems and first lady Michelle Obama has said she does not want her daughters eating it.

The American Medical Association has said there's not enough evidence to restrict the use of high fructose corn syrup, although it wants more research.

The Corn Refiners Association, which produced the advertisements, declined to provide anyone for interview for this story. In a motion to dismiss the lawsuit, corn industry lawyers note that demand for high fructose corn syrup has dropped over the past decade even as obesity levels in the U.S. have continued to rise.

It is that motion to dismiss that U.S. District Judge Consuelo Marshall will consider Tuesday.

A year ago, the Corn Refiners Association asked the Food and Drug Administration if it could start using the term "corn sugar" as an alternative to high fructose corn syrup. It could take another year for the FDA to decide on the name, but the corn industry has already started using it in advertisements.

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Sugar industry lawyers claim corn refiners have already spent \$50 million trying to persuade the public to accept corn sugar as a name.

It would not be the first time a food has been rebranded. In 1988, for instance, low ercuric acid rapeseed oil became much more popular after it was renamed "canola oil."

Expert opinion is divided on high fructose corn syrup. Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, has said that there's no evidence that the sweetener is any worse for the body than sugar.

Michael Goran, a professor of preventive medicine and director of the Childhood Obesity Center at the University of Southern California, said he does not give his kids products containing high fructose corn syrup because it contains high levels of fructose, which can be stored in the liver as fat and trigger gout and hypertension problems.

"As a father and as a consumer, I like to know what I am eating," he said. "The industry has done a very good job trying convince people it's sugar from corn. It's not ... it's manufactured from corn by a highly industrialized process."

Goran and other professionals say the healthiest option is consume smaller amounts of all sugar in general.

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