Report: Food Industry Self-Regulates On Safety

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- Thousands of ingredients that go into food have been classified as safe by private industry alone, without any U.S. government oversight, according to a new report published Wednesday.

Since the early 1960's, private companies and industry trade associations have determined at least 3,000ingredients are safe, with no federal scrutiny, the study found. The ingredients include everything from artificially synthesized chemicals used in chewing gum to grape seed extract used in cheese and instant coffee.

The peer-reviewed report published in the Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety journal draws on research funded by the Pew Health Group, the health and consumer safety arm of the nonprofit Pew Charitable Trusts.

"We don't know the names of a lot of these chemicals because the companies have never told FDA or the public about them," said Erik Olson, Pew Health Group's director of food and consumer safety programs and one of the study's authors. "Often there is not publicly available data on the potential health impacts because FDA has never evaluated them."

The Grocery Manufacturers Association says the industry only classifies ingredients as safe after a battery of rigorous biological tests but agrees that more transparency would help build consumer confidence.

"The system is less transparent than it should be so we're looking to open that dialogue," said Leon Bruner, the association's chief science officer, who agreed the study's estimates were reasonable. "We are completely comfortable with increasing the transparency or the visibility of ingredients that go through the process."

The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act makes food manufacturers responsible for ensuringfood ingredients are safe. Companies can classify an ingredient as "generally recognized as safe" for use in a specific product but aren't required to tell the Food and Drug Administration about what they find.

Some do, through a voluntary notification program that gives the FDA a chance to review the findings.

Officials have said that if a company markets a food or beverage the agency believes is unsafe, the government can always issue warning letters or seize the product.

FDA Deputy Commissioner Michael Taylor said Wednesday the study raised important issues.

"Transparency in decision-making is a high priority for FDA, and FDA considers it timely to explore whether the statutory and regulatory framework for food additives adequately addresses today's need for transparency," Taylor said.

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