



An NGO pleaded with Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis this week to include legal limits for acrylamide in food and drink for infants and young children in the draft proposal due for a vote in June.

Nusa Urbancic, campaigns director at Changing Markets, told Mr Andriukaitis that 10% of baby biscuits sold exceeded the benchmark for acrylamide.

The European Commission made clear at the meeting that under the General Food Law food companies must not sell any products which are unsafe.

It acknowledged, however, that member states had different views about what level of acrylamide should trigger a product withdrawal.

Ms Urbancic stressed that the European Food Safety Authority had warned that babies and children were at the greatest risk of cancer from acrylamide exposure.

"Will you set maximum limits on baby foods?" she asked Mr Andriukaitis at the SAFE (Safe Food Advocacy Europe) conference in Brussels.

Mr Vytenis responded that the Commission would eventually introduce limits for ready-to-eat foods.

The conference heard that an initial vote is likely to be held in June on the acrylamide proposal, which is under the hygiene legislation and includes mandatory codes of practice.

The benchmark levels for each food category - which are advisory, not legal limits - have now been set at the 85th percentile - meaning that 15 to 20% of products currently on the market exceed them.

More ambitious

"Additional effort will be needed," said senior Commission official Frans Verstraete, explaining that the benchmarks were set at a slightly more ambitious level than in previous drafts and would be regularly reviewed.

"Under Article 14 of the General Food Law, it is clear that a food with a high level of acrylamide has to be withdrawn from the market," he said.

"It has been done, with baby food taken off the market," he said, referring to the rapid alert issued by Croatia before Christmas for baby biscuits with 1020ug/kg acrylamide which were withdrawn from sale in five countries.

However, other products have been identified by Changing Markets as having acrylamide levels above the benchmarks, including Nestle biscuits which were featured in its presentation at the conference.

The problem is that, at the moment, it is unclear at what level a product must be removed and different control authorities have different attitudes.

Mr Verstraete said discussions with member states on maximum levels for ready-to-eat products would begin as soon as the regulation to impose codes of conduct and new benchmarks was voted on.

The legal limits would be set through contaminants legislation and they would apply to food eaten in restaurants and cafes as well as other outlets, he said, in response to a question from the trade association, HOTREC.

Practical difficulties

Reacting to the demands for legal limits now, he highlighted practical difficulties, such as the fact that the enzyme asparaginase, used to mitigate acrylamide, could not be used in organic products.

He also pointed out that storing potatoes increased acrylamide levels, claiming this was also a problem in setting limits.

However, Changing Markets strongly disagreed. "There does not seem to be an issue with organic products," said Ms Urbancic.



She also called on EFSA to publish all the latest data it had on acrylamide levels and to give brand names so that consumers could see which products have the highest levels.

She said Changing Markets was still waiting to hear from EFSA on an access-to-documents request for the brand names. "The UK publishes them and EFSA should publish them in the public interest," she said.

She referred to three surveys by Changing Markets in the UK, Germany and France showing that some products exceed the benchmarks.

It had written to the food agencies or responsible bodies in all three countries to ask what they were doing about it and had not had a reply.

She also stressed that the current Commission proposal not apply to third country imports because the Commission has no jurisdiction over codes of practice used by suppliers outside the EU.