

Call for EU definition of ‘natural’ for use in claims and labelling

By Sara Lewis, published on 19 Nov 2020 on EU Food Law

*** Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) calls for EU definition of ‘natural’ for claims and labelling**

*** Foods bearing ‘natural’ claims often contain synthetic substances, says SAFE**

*** SAFE launches WeValueTrueNatural campaign to push for EU criteria for using the term ‘natural’**

Brussels-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) is calling for the EU to lay down a legal definition of ‘natural’ for use in claims and labelling to stop consumers being misled.

In a statement SAFE points to claims such as “100% natural” or “made with 100% natural ingredients”, which the NGO says are easy to find on food packaging, asking “but can these products be considered truly natural?”

SAFE analysed the composition of hundreds of products available on the European market and found that most foods using such claims contain chemical and synthetic substances which are far from being considered “natural”, according to the [report](#), “Ensuring proper food information to consumers from misleading use of ‘natural’ on food products.”

The statement argues that this misuse of natural claims is “a serious issue” affecting daily life. “How much do we know of the real composition of food products? Is the current labelling legal framework providing correct information to consumers? The answer is no. In fact, the EU does not provide a definition of what can be considered “natural”, allowing food producers to overuse the term and claiming products characteristics which do not always match consumer’s expectations,” says the SAFE statement.

“It is not against EU Food law. The only reference to the term “natural” in the EU legislation can be found in the Annex of the Regulation on health claims, which does not require any clear condition to be fulfilled by food producers to use such term. Consequently, consumers rely on food packaging and labelling to grasp product information, ending in [them] making their choices based on [the] wrong assumptions,” says SAFE.

WeValueTrueNatural campaign

The findings have prompted SAFE to launch the [WeValueTrueNatural campaign](#) “to raise awareness on the value of real natural food to ensure that consumers are not misled by ambiguous food claims.”

SAFE underlines that in the current framework, “natural products cannot properly be distinguished from those of synthetic origin,” with the report flagging up the novel food zeaxanthin and supplements containing melatonin as prime examples.

In August 2018 the European Commission adopted an implementing act amending labelling requirements for novel zeaxanthin to remove the prefix “synthetic”. The Commission explained that the change would ensure consistency with other synthetic substances which are not labelled as “synthetic”.

The report argues that “the uncertainty of the current legal framework does not allow consumers to properly differentiate and identify food components in final products. Confusing labelling requirements creates situations where consumers cannot properly differentiate between substances that may be of natural or synthetic origin.”

All melatonin used in supplements is of synthetic origin as it is produced by chemical processes, the report points out, noting: “Consumers buy products containing melatonin believing that the substance is of natural origin.”

SAFE says that the melatonin example “highlights the misleading use of the term natural on final products” and contends “it should be forbidden to use such claims on products using ingredients of synthetic origin.”

The report notes that the food information to consumers regulation (1169/2011) does not define the term ‘natural’ and argues that “the uncertainty of the current legal framework does not allow consumers to properly differentiate and identify food components in food products. The lack of mandatory information regarding the origin of the ingredient – together with a lack of definition of “natural” for food products – leads “natural” targeted products to present chemical ingredients hidden behind unclear denominations.”

SAFE is calling on European decision-makers to change all that by laying down specific criteria and standards for use of the term “natural” to stop misleading consumers. One suggestion in the report is to amend the existing definition of “natural/naturally” laid down in an Annex to the nutrition and health claims regulation (1924/2006).

“It is obvious that the term “natural” appears to be increasingly more appealing for consumers and it tends to be instinctively associated with positive characteristics, such as healthiness,

chemical-substances free, biodegradable, unprocessed or GMO-free,” says SAFE, adding: “Such standards should be reflected by a fair labelling system, capable of valuing real natural food and of being trustable for consumers.”

The statement points to the May 2020 Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy and its commitment to provide a set of legislative proposals to support strengthen rules on misleading information. “If the EU wants to meet the Green Deal and Farm to Fork ambitions, it should help consumers in trusting food labelling providing the right tools to make the right choices,” says SAFE.

“The farm to Fork strategy represents a great opportunity to finally create an EU sustainable labelling framework up to EU consumers’ expectations and current environmental challenges. However, we are going to lose this chance if the EU does not develop stronger labelling requirements, such as the definition of “natural” for EU food products,” SAFE Secretary General Floriana Cimmarusti told IHS Markit.