Dunkin' Donuts No Longer Dunked in Chemicals

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Image credit: SMR Podcast

Dunkin' Brands, Dunkin' Donuts' parent company, has agreed to remove titanium dioxide, a whitening agent that is a common source of nanomaterials, from all powdered sugar used to make the company's donuts. As a result of this progress, the advocacy group As You Sow has withdrawn a shareholder proposal asking Dunkin' to assess and reduce the risks of using nanomaterials in its food products.

In 2013, As You Sow commissioned independent laboratory tests of Dunkin's white powdered donuts, finding they contained titanium dioxide nanomaterials. Nanomaterials – substances engineered to have extremely small dimensions – offer new food industry applications, however their small size may also result in greater toxicity for human and environmental health. Insufficient safety information exists regarding these manufactured particles, especially for use in foods, but preliminary studies show that nanomaterials can cause DNA and chromosomal damage, organ damage, inflammation, brain damage and genital malformations, among other harms.

When presented last year, the shareholder proposal received 18.7% support at Dunkin's annual meeting. As You Sow has already published research on nanomaterials in food, including Slipping Through the Cracks: An Issue Brief on Nanomaterials in Foods.

"The pressure is on Dunkin's competitors to follow suit," commented Austin Wilson, Environmental Health Program Manager at As You Sow. "Peer-reviewed research on titanium dioxide nanoparticles has found that they may damage human cells and DNA. Investors expect companies to take a precautionary approach to health and safety."

Nanomaterials are not regulated in food and the FDA warns that there is no available data to prove that ingredients on the nanometer scale are generally safe to use. Asbestos, also a nanomaterial, was used before its harms were fully understood, leading to a costly health crisis.

This isn't the first questionable compound found in the donut chain's product. Dunkin' - along with Subway, McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, Starbucks and Arby's - was also found to be using a compound known as azodicarbonamide (or E927), which is banned from use in food in Europe and Australia, yet the FDA has deemed it safe for use here in the States. The compound is commonly used to increase the elasticity of items such as shoe soles and yoga mats, and was found to be carcinogenic in lab mice.

However, Dunkin' Brands has demonstrated its responsiveness to shareholders on other issues, specifically by addressing palm oil in the supply chain. Last year, the company committed to sourcing only 100 percent sustainable palm oil in the US by 2016 after scoring a failing grade on the Union of Concerned Scientists' palm oil commitment scorecard.

http://www.sustainablebrands.com/news_and_views/chemistry_materials/caitlin_kauffman/dunkin'_donuts_no_longer_dunked_chemicals