

# codex alimentarius commission

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION

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**Agenda Item 8**

**CX/FAC 00/9**  
December 1999

## JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

### CODEX COMMITTEE ON FOOD ADDITIVES AND CONTAMINANTS

*Thirty-second Session*

*Beijing, China, 20 - 24 March 2000*

### DISCUSSION PAPER ON THE USE OF COLOURS IN FOODS

(Prepared by Denmark)

#### INTRODUCTION

1. At the 31st session of the Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (CCFAC) a discussion paper prepared by Denmark on the use of colours in food was introduced to the Committee for consideration.<sup>1</sup>
2. The discussion paper included some proposals for options to be considered, such as, “The committee could develop a list of basic foods in which added colours will not be endorsed by CCFAC (basic foods being a specified list of foods)”, and “CCFAC should ask CCFL to examine the labelling criteria for added colours in order to ensure that they are sufficient to ensure that persons with intolerance etc. are adequately protected”.
3. These proposals were to be considered in addition to the criteria established in the Preamble of General Standard for Food Additives (GSFA): “food additive provisions will be endorsed by the CCFAC only if they have been evaluated by JECFA and present no risk to the health of consumers at the proposed level of use, the use of the additive is technologically justified and the use of the additive does not mislead consumers”. These criteria apply to all food additives regardless of additive functional class. Some Codex Member States regard colours as a special class of food additives and are of the opinion that CCFAC should consider whether colours require special principles for their use and subsequently whether the CCFAC should consider developing specific criteria for endorsing colour provisions in the draft GSFA.
4. Some delegations, including the delegation from Consumers International, were in favour of CCFAC developing additional criteria for the use of colours including a list of basic foods in which colours will not be endorsed. Other delegations found that the criteria in the Preamble of the GSFA were applicable to colours as to all other additives.
5. All delegations and international organisations were invited to send their comments to Denmark in order to revise the paper for circulation, comment and consideration at the 32nd CCFAC. The paper was revised based on comments from ELC and Consumers International and discussions at the 31<sup>st</sup> CCFAC.

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<sup>1</sup> ALINORM 99/12A, paras. 59-64.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL NEED FOR THE USE OF COLOURS**

6. There are several justifications notified for the technological need for the use of colours in food. For example, some foods will lose colour during processing and/or storage and addition of colour can compensate for any loss of colour during processing. Food colours are also added to food because of consumer preference or cultural traditions for foods with a characteristic colour. In addition, colours are added to foods to provide variety and to enhance attractiveness or to impart a distinctive colour to some processed foods e.g., candies, soft drinks, cakes etc. In all cases, the amount of added colour is technologically limited to that which achieves the intended level of coloration.

## **SAFETY ASPECTS**

7. National authorities and international science-based Expert committees (e.g., JECFA) evaluate the safety of colours. The information to support the safety of colours and other food additives is similar. However, the allergy aspects are not included in the safety evaluation of food additives, including colours, as no scientific method has been developed to identify this aspect.

8. In Denmark, scientific experts have examined the safety of colours with respect to intolerance reactions and have advised that rather than prohibiting the use of some colours in food the presence of added colours should be declared on the food label. In this manner, consumers are enabled to make informed decisions about the foods that they purchase. However, Denmark decided to prohibit the use of colours in basic foods and required that all added colours must be declared on the food label. The food groups, which are regarded as groups of basic foods, were listed with reference to the food categorisation system used in the food additives legislation. Denmark took this action to ensure that persons with intolerance, hypersensitivity, or allergenicity to certain food colours have access to basic foods without added colour. Other countries have chosen to limit more strictly the addition of certain classes of colours, such as azo-dyes, to foods.

## **MISLEADING CONSUMERS**

9. The Preamble to the GSFA establishes that the use of food additives, including colours, should not mislead consumers as to the identity or quality of the food. This includes the use of food additives to enhance the appearance of food in such a way that the consumer is misled with respect to the quality of the food. In accordance with the Codex General Standard for the Labelling of Prepackaged Foods (CODEX STAN 1-1985, Rev 1-1991), the use of all food additives should be declared in the ingredient labelling statement to allow consumers access to information which enables them to make informed choices about the foods they purchase. This includes added colours.

10. Consumers will purchase raw, unprocessed and fresh foods, such as vegetables, fruits, seafood, meat, etc., in expectation of their freshness. The colour of these foods, once gathered or caught, will often fade and discolour over time and often deteriorate in their quality. Application of food colour to these types of foods may mislead consumers into judging the freshness and quality of the food. Therefore, the use of colours in fresh, unprocessed food should not be accepted as it would mislead consumers and such uses would in general not be in compliance with the general criteria in the preamble to the GSFA. The addition of colours in raw, fresh, unprocessed fresh foods in Annex I would not be accepted.

11. Labelling of food is required, including labelling with food additives used. However, in some countries a considerable number of the population is not able to read this information. As colours have not been used traditionally in basic food these consumers could be misled if colours were permitted and used in basic foods despite of the labelling information. Basic foods, including raw, unprocessed fresh foods should therefore, as a matter of principle, not be coloured by the use of colour additives.

## **SOME CONSUMER VIEWPOINTS CONCERNING THE USE OF COLOURS IN FOOD**

12. Consumer's International, as well as national consumer organisations, question the need for food additives in general and added colours in particular. Several arguments have been brought forward and some of them will be mentioned below.

13. Some consumers are concerned that added colours are unnecessary and are only used to mislead consumers. Others contend that full disclosure of added colours in the ingredient labelling statement is not enough to prevent misleading uses of added colour because it requires consumers to have the knowledge and time to distinguish between foods with and without added colour. Other consumers contend that because they do not accept any justification for the technological need for the use of colours, then colours should not be included in the GSFA.

14. An additional concern regards colours added to animal feeds with the intention of achieving a colouring effect in foods for human consumption (e.g., the addition of colour to poultry feed to colour egg yolks, the addition of colour to fish feed to colour salmon flesh). Such animal feed practices can result in the presence of colours in foods that may not contain a label declaring the presence of added colours.

15. Some colours have been associated with reports of allergic reactions (e.g., tartrazine). In the debate on whether these reactions could be avoided, some consumers are of the opinion that because colours are intentionally added to food, they can also be easily excluded from food if national authorities would not approve them. Other consumers contend that national authorities should prohibit the use of colours in basic foods. The interpretation of what basic foods are can differ from country to country. For example, basic foods could be regarded as those foods that consumers should eat in accordance with national nutritional recommendations. Others could argue that because some individuals consume considerable amounts of foods that are not included among those recommended by national authorities, the use of colours should also be prohibited in foods that contribute significantly to the diet.

16. Among the colours, azo-dyes have been identified as a group of special concern because of the potential for carcinogenic constituents. Azo-dyes have special limited uses in some countries and special attention should be given to CCFAC's discussion of these colours.

17. Consumers also claim that food-labelling requirements do not cover the food served to the public in the catering sector; consequentially, colours used in this sector cannot be identified. This could cause problems for consumers both in relation to intolerances and to being misled. These problems would be limited if colours were approved for a special limited number of food groups.

18. Although there is no scientific basis, some consumers differentiate between natural and synthetic colours and they are often of the opinion that natural colours are less harmful than synthetic colours, even though all colours and other food additives are evaluated by the same procedures.

## **PROPOSED OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

19. The CCFAC should consider the proposed options below. Options A-F below should be discussed concerning the use of colours and the need for the development of special policies in this area of food additives.

Option A: CCFAC could develop a list of basic foods in which added colours will not be endorsed by CCFAC. The foods that could form the basis for further discussion on what foods groups are regarded as basic foods are listed with reference to the Food Categorisation System in the Annex to this paper

Option B: CCFAC could adopt a policy that the use of colours in basic food and other foods that are consumed in large amounts should not be endorsed. A proposal for a list of basic food is enclosed in the Annex to this paper.

Option C: CCFAC could continue to apply the same criteria for endorsing maximum use levels for colours as for other food additives.

Option D: CCFAC could amend the Preamble to the GSFA to establish additional criteria for the use of colours to ensure that consumers are not misled by the presence of added colours.

Option E: CCFAC could request the JECFA to evaluate whether there is a need for drawing up a list of food additives which should be subject to special limitations due to problems with intolerance, hypersensitivity or allergic reactions.

Option F: CCFAC could request the Codex Committee on Food Labelling to examine the labelling criteria for added colours to ensure that they are sufficient to ensure that persons with intolerance, hypersensitivity or allergenic responses to added colours are adequately protected from unsafe exposure to added colours. The examination should take into account colours used in unpackaged foods such as foods served in restaurants, etc.

**Proposed List of Basic Food**

Option A - CCFAC could develop a list of basic foods in which added colours will not be endorsed by CCFAC. The foods proposed as basic foods are listed below.

**Definition**

The list could be developed in accordance with the following definition:

Basic foodstuffs are in this relation, foodstuffs, of which the intake in usual amounts will cover the major part of the energy intake and/or the nutritional need for a foodstuff by a majority of the population, or of a specific group in the population.

As “basic foodstuffs” are defined in order to provide a basis for the discussion on whether basic foodstuffs should be colored or not, seen from a more general point-of-view, the term “basic foodstuffs” will here be identified with reference to the GSFA (General Standard for Food Additives) Food Categorization System. As the Food Categorization System is not developed in order to facilitate the identification of “basic foods”, some of the food groups will contain food items which are within the definition.

Therefore, the reference list will have some food groups mentioned which are not regarded as basic foods in general but which can include subgroups which could be regarded as basic foods.

**Proposal from Consumers International on Product Groups  
Which Should be Considered as Basic Food**

<b>Food groups</b>		<b>Exceptions</b>	
1.1; -> 1.2.1	Dairy products Fermented milks (plain)	1.2; 1.2.1.1 1.2.1.2 1.2.2	Fermented and renneted milk products - ” - not heat-treated - ” – heat-treated renneted milk
1.3; 1.4; 1.5; 1.6	Condensed milk and analogues Cream Milk and cream powder Cheese should be considered	1.7	Dairy-based desserts
2.0 ->	Fats and oils	2.2.2 2.3 2.4	Emulsions containing less than 80% fat Fat emulsions other than food category 2.2 Fat-based desserts
4.1 -> 4.2.1->	Fresh fruit Fresh vegetables	4.2.2.6 4.2.2.7	Vegetable and nut & seed pulps Fermented vegetable products
6.1	Whole, broken and flaked grain, including rice	6.5	Cereals and starch based desserts
7.0 ->	Bakery wares	7.2 ->	Fine bakery wares
8.0 ->	Meat and meat products		
9.0 ->	Fish and fish products	9.3.3	Salmon substitutes, caviar and other fish roe products
10.1 ->	Fresh egg	10.4	Egg-based desserts
13.0	Foodstuffs intended for particular nutritional use formulae	13.4 13.6	Dietetic formulae for slimming purpose and weight reduction Food supplements
14.0	Beverages, excluding dairy products	14.1.4 14.1.5 14.2	Water-based flavoured drinks, including “sport” or “electrolyte drinks Coffee, coffee infusions... Alcoholic beverages...