

BPA industry seeks to polish chemical's image

May 31 2009, By Susanne Rust and Meg Kissinger

Frustrated at media portrayals of bisphenol A as a dangerous chemical, food-packaging executives and lobbyists for the chemical makers met last week at an exclusive Washington, D.C., club where they hammered out a strategy, including showcasing a pregnant woman to talk about the chemical's benefits.

The meeting was private, but the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel obtained a summary of the discussion. John Rost, chairman of the North American Metal Packaging Alliance, confirmed that the meeting took place. He said the summary was incomplete and did not accurately portray all the discussions.

"It was a five-hour meeting," he said.

But he did verify all the points in the summary.

A pregnant woman would be "the holy grail" to serve as a spokeswoman, the memo says. Attendees said they doubted they could find a scientist to serve as a spokesman for [BPA](#).

When asked why it would be hard to find a scientist to tout the chemical's benefits, Rost told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that any studies paid for by chemical makers are discounted by the media.

"The minute industry pays for a meal or an airline ticket, that scientist is tainted as working for industry," Rost said. "They put their reputations at

risk."

Other strategies discussed at the meeting included focusing on how BPA bans would disproportionately put minorities at risk, particularly Hispanics and African-Americans who are more inclined to be poor and dependent on canned foods. Committee members said they would try to get stories in the media that spread the message that canned goods made without BPA would be more likely to become contaminated. BPA serves to seal food in cans, helping to keep out bacteria.

The group agreed to pay \$500,000 to survey the American public about BPA safety.

Companies and organizations attending the meeting included the Coca-Cola Co., Alcoa Inc., Crown Holdings Inc., the North American Metal Packaging Alliance Inc., the Grocery Manufacturers Association, Del Monte Corp. and the American Chemistry Council, which lobbies for the chemical makers.

Richard Wiles, executive director of the activist Environmental Working Group, said he was surprised by the content of the memo.

"I mean, it seems over the top, even by industry," Wiles said. "I'm amazed in this day and age they'd write this stuff down."

He said the document suggests that the chemical industry can't rely on science to sell its product.

He pointed to their agreement that fear tactics might be their best shot at keeping the chemical on store shelves.

The memo says that attendees suggested fear tactics be used, such as asking consumers, "Do you want to have access to baby food anymore?"

"This looks as bad as the tobacco or asbestos documents to me," Wiles said.

The memo also indicates the group is concerned that whatever chemical they use to replace BPA will also have public relations problems.

"It does not matter what the next material is," the group says in the memo. "There will be issues with it, and the committee wants to work to make people feel more comfortable with BPA and 'BPA2' or whatever chemical comes next."

"Would it ever occur to these people to use a safe chemical so we wouldn't have 'BPA2'?" Wiles said.

Rost said he and others have been increasingly frustrated with BPA's bad image.

"We're getting no traction and no coverage in conventional media," Rost said. "We're looking for ways to get our side of the story out there."

The committee is baffled by media accounts discounting studies paid for by chemical makers.

A growing number of studies in the past two decades have linked BPA to a host of health problems, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes and hyperactivity.

Government agencies are divided on the safety of BPA, which is used to line most food and beverage cans. A group of scientists from the National Toxicology Program said last year it had "some concern" for the chemical, particularly in fetuses, newborns and small children.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has declared BPA safe, citing

two studies, both of which were paid for by chemical makers.

Canada has declared BPA to be toxic and is banning it from baby bottles. In the United States, government bodies issuing bans include Suffolk County, N.Y., the state of Minnesota and the city of Chicago.

Bills have been introduced in both houses of Congress to ban the chemical in food packaging. Other bans are being considered in several states, including Michigan, Maine, Connecticut and California.

Legislatively, the committee is focusing on Connecticut and California, the memo says.

"The members are focusing on more legislative battles and befriending people that are able to manipulate the legislative process," the memo says. "They believe a grassroots and legislative approach is favorable because the legislators worry about how the moms will react."

If the Connecticut bill goes through, the committee believes it will be a good opportunity to talk about the negative impact that ban will have on businesses and employment, the memo says:

"How will it affect the union workers? The committee wants to put a proposal together for the right way to deal with legislative issues in each state."

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