

Big Corn, Big Sugar in bitter US row on sweetener

December 17 2011, by Rob Lever

Big Corn and Big Sugar are locked in a legal and public relations fight in the US over a plan to change the name of a corn-based sweetener that has gotten a bad name.

The fight began last year when Corn Refiners Association, a trade association, proposed changing the name of [high-fructose corn syrup](#) to merely "corn [sugar](#)."

The group said the new name "more accurately describes this sweetener and helps clarify food products labeling for manufacturers and consumers alike."

But the sugar industry argued this change would be a bitter pill for US consumers and would only add to the confusion about a sweetener that has drawn criticism by some health advocates.

Sugar producers have filed suit alleging the corn industry has spent \$50 million in "a mass media rebranding campaign that misleads the consuming public by asserting falsely that HFCS is natural and is indistinguishable from the sugar extracted from sugar cane and [sugar beets](#)."

The lawsuit, which seeks an end to the ads using the term "corn sugar," states that use of the [corn syrup](#) increased over 1,000 percent between 1970 and 1990 and that this rise "bears a strong temporal relationship to the growth in American obesity."

Sugar makers say the corn industry is making a desperate effort to salvage the product which consumers are increasingly avoiding.

Sugar Association lawyer Adam Fox told AFP the group is seeking to stop the ads because "it is absolutely false for them to characterize this as a natural product."

In its response, the corn industry says the sugar industry is trying "to stifle free speech" and seeking to vilify its corn products.

"The sugar industry is wrongfully alleging that high fructose corn syrup (a sugar made from corn) causes health issues that do not arise from consuming cane and beet sugar," said Audrae Erickson, president of the Corn Refiners Association.

"We believe that the sugar industry's views are misleading [American consumers](#). The CRA will continue its work to educate consumers about high fructose corn syrup and will vigorously oppose the sugar industry's attempt to stifle public discussion of this important health issue."

The corn industry last year petitioned the Food and Drug Administration for permission to use the term "corn sugar" instead of high fructose corn syrup. But in the meantime it has launched television and print ads hoping to gain public support.

The campaign cites experts saying there is no difference between various sugars in terms of metabolism, calories or other nutritional values.

"Whether it's corn sugar or cane sugar, your body can't tell the difference. Sugar is sugar," one ad says.

Among the studies cited is a 2008 report by the American Medical Association which concludes "it appears unlikely that HFCS contributes

more to obesity or other conditions than sucrose."

But a 2011 study cited by the sugar industry from the journal *Metabolism* concludes the fructose corn syrup leads to "significantly different acute metabolic effects" than plain sugar.

Some have linked the obesity epidemic to consumption of processed foods and soft drinks which use corn syrup in place of costlier cane or beet sugar.

Alternative medicine guru and author Andrew Weill writes that the corn product "is a marker for low-quality food and has no place in a healthy diet."

"The most widely used kind of HFCS may have disruptive effects on metabolism, as the body doesn't utilize fructose well. In fact, regular consumption of HFCS may contribute to obesity."

The National Consumers League has sent a letter urging the FDA to reject the renaming petition and noted that the corn [sweetener](#) in question "has received much negative publicity over the last several years."

"Questions have been raised concerning potential links to obesity and a variety of obesity-related health conditions including diabetes and heart disease," the letter said.

"Some consumers are concerned about emerging science regarding nutrition and health effects of HFCS, while others simply want to avoid highly processed sweeteners in favor of more natural substances."

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University, said both sides are missing the point, which is that Americans consume too

much sugar.

"Changing the name of HFCS to [corn sugar](#) is about marketing, not public health," she said.

"If the FDA decides to approve the change, it will not alter the fact that about 60 pounds each of HFCS and table sugar are available per capita per year, and that Americans would be a lot healthier consuming a lot less of either one."

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