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European food products still contain dangerously high levels of known carcinogen new analysis reveals

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Independent analysis of European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) data reveals that levels of acrylamide, a known carcinogen, in food products consumed in the European Union are still dangerously high, demonstrating the failure of the current voluntary approach.

Draft legislation put forward by the European Commission also offers insufficient protection to consumers, the analysis finds, as it fails to set legally binding limits for acrylamide in foods and excludes a large part of the sector from meaningful obligations.

A new report by SumOfUs [1], a global consumer watchdog, reveals that levels of acrylamide in numerous food products commonly sold across the European Union remain persistently high and that a significant proportion of these contain higher levels of acrylamide than the current recommended benchmarks. This represents 12 per cent of all the food sampled by EU Member States in the period between 2007 and 2014, or 2,200 samples in total. The highest acrylamide levels were found in a sample of instant coffee in Belgium (42 times above the benchmark) and a sample of French fries found in Denmark (13 times above the benchmark). A worrying proportion of baby food samples were also above the benchmark [2].

Member states have been obliged to monitor levels of acrylamide in food products since 2007, and report this data to EFSA. The information for 2013 and 2014 has not been publicly released until today. EFSA refused to release information on brand names, although a few countries report this data at the national level [3].

Acrylamide is a carcinogenic chemical found in many food products consumed by Europeans on a daily basis. It is present in bread, coffee, biscuits, cereals, potato products and even baby food. In 2015, EFSA published a scientific opinion which concluded that acrylamide in food is a public health concern as “it potentially increases the risk of developing cancer in consumers of all ages”. The exposure of babies and young children to acrylamide gives rise to particular concern, according to EFSA and the French Food Safety Authority (ANSES) [4].

“Our analysis shows that any approach to tackle acrylamide that relies on the food industry’s goodwill is destined to fail” said Paul Ferris from SumOfUs. “The Commission needs to show leadership and put in place maximum limits on acrylamide found in food. This is the way EU law deals with other contaminants in food and the best way to ensure that the most vulnerable consumers are protected.”

The report also analyses the draft legislative proposal on acrylamide [5] that is currently being discussed by the European Commission and Member States. Significantly, the
The proposal simply extends the existing unsuccessful approach by making ‘codes of practice’ developed by the industry mandatory and does not introduce maximum limits for acrylamide, contrary to the approach taken with other contaminants. In addition, the application of the rules is patchy and inconsistent. Individual food manufacturers can cherry pick which measures to apply, and what is more, monitoring requirements are very infrequent and allow all companies to replace an accurate laboratory test with an approximate measurement, such as colour testing (i.e. ‘testing’ the acrylamide level contained in a given product simply by evaluating its colour as it appears to the naked eye).

In the name of minimising the administrative burden for small and micro enterprises, the proposal simplifies requirements even further for most of these companies, representing over 95 per cent of the sector and therefore ultimately compromising the effectiveness of the measures. More surprisingly, it applies the simpler requirements across all companies in the entire hospitality and eating out sector, regardless of their size.

“It is unjustifiable that the Commission’s proposal puts the same simple requirements on multi-billion-euro food giants, such as McDonalds, as chip shops and family bakeries” said Nuša Urbančič from Changing Markets. “The proposal in its current form also excludes all imports, which represent a significant part of the market, as the application of measures cannot be verified outside EU borders. The Commission should do much better than this and provide a level playing field that guarantees sufficient protection for the consumer.”

The Commission is expected to discuss this proposal at a meeting with Member States on 25 November in Brussels. The vote on the draft proposal is now expected in February 2017.

Notes to editors:

1. The report is based on data released by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) in October 2016, following an access to documents request by Changing Markets, who also conducted the data analysis. The report is available: https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.sumofus.org/images/PASSING_THE_HOT_POTATO.pdf
2. This analysis shows that in 2014, 12 per cent of samples of baby food and 28 per cent of baby food produced from cereals, presented acrylamide levels above the EC benchmark. The highest acrylamide concentrations across the series were found in samples of baby rusks, baby foods and processed cereal baby products taken in Germany, UK and Czech Republic respectively.
   ANSES’ study on children’s diet https://www.anses.fr/fr/node/124298

About SumOfUs:
SumOfUs is a global consumer watchdog: an online community of ten million people who campaign to hold big corporations accountable. We use our power as consumers, workers and investors to hold the biggest companies in the world to account. For more information about SumOfUs please visit sumofus.org

**About Changing Markets:**
Changing Markets is a campaigning organisation formed to accelerate and scale up solutions to sustainability challenges by leveraging the power of markets. Working with NGOs, companies and other foundations, we create and support campaigns that shift market share away from unsustainable products and companies to environmentally and socially beneficial solutions. www.changingmarkets.org / @ChangingMarkets

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