

Stevia gets Australian approval for food and beverages

By Stephen Daniells, 08-Oct-2008

The Australian food authority FSANZ has approved the natural sweetener steviol glycosides (stevia), as an ingredient in foods and beverages in Australia and New Zealand.

The application, made by the Plant Science Group at Central Queensland University and Australian Stevia Mills, will be gazetted tomorrow, according to CQUniversity.

CQUniversity's Professor David Midmore welcomed the approval of stevia as a *"a safe and valuable addition to food ingredients - look for it as stevia, steviol glycosides or as ingredient number 960,"* he said.

He added that the approval was based on the results of *"hundreds of trials carried out in many countries. The results from these trials were a key factor in the approval by FSANZ."*

In an email communication, Prof. Midmore told FoodNavigator.com: *"In principle this [approval] is very important, for commercial companies can now put steviol glycosides into their products to sweeten them."*

Such products include soft drinks, and cooked items, such as cakes and biscuits since steviol glycosides are thermo-stable up to 200 °C. Steviol glycosides can also be used in organic ranges that couldn't use artificial sweeteners, said Prof. Midmore.

A draft approval is already available [online](#) and states: *"Approval of steviol glycosides as a food additive is proposed... At the levels of use requested by the Applicant, it does not raise any public health and safety concerns."*

"The risk assessment of steviol glycosides is based on the best available scientific evidence and the draft variation helps promote an efficient and internationally competitive food industry."

"Use of steviol glycosides is technologically justified since it has desirable qualities that are of interest to the food manufacturing industry."

"The regulation impact assessment concluded that the benefits of permitting use of steviol glycosides outweigh any costs associated with its use."

Stevia ins-and-outs

Steviol glycosides - the extract of the leaves of the plant *Stevia rebaudiana* - are a group of intense sweeteners.

"Stevia is not a new invention and thus no company holds a patent and would go to the expense of approval just to let other companies cash in on their approval," said Prof. Midmore.

The sweetener is being lined up initially for beverages. Indeed, two giants of the sector – Pepsi and Coca-Cola – are both active in bringing their own stevia brands to the market based on rebiana, the sweetest, purest part of the stevia leaf, and reportedly about 200 times as sweet as sugar.

The approval from [Australia](#) and New Zealand means that such companies *"could, I believe, use the current approval to enter into the Australian market,"* said Prof. Midmore. *"But this is provided that they are not enzymatically modifying the steviol glycosides."*

Supply and demand

Prof. Midmore explained the University made the application because stevia was recognised as a potential new high-value crop for farmers.

However, Prof. Midmore acknowledged that the Australian crop is non-existent. *"This will put pressure on world stocks of steviol glycosides,"* he said.

"We need to develop short-day insensitive lines and fine-tune agronomic practise, like crop protection, before Australia will be competitive on the world market."

The state of play in the US

The US market has seen the most intense activity and interest in stevia recently. Stevia, which is permitted for sale in the US as a dietary supplement on the basis of its low glycemic index, is yet to have FDA GRAS status for use in food and beverages.

The US market for stevia is estimated to be worth about \$60m, a figure analysts say could triple with FDA GRAS. Currently the biggest markets for stevia are Japan and Korea.

In July, it was announced that PepsiCo has joined with the Whole Earth Sweetener Company (a subsidiary of Merisant Company) to launch its rebiana sweetener PureVia.

Meanwhile Coca-Cola has teamed up with Cargill to use its rebiana brand, called Truvia.

Cargill is already selling Truvia online as a table-top sweetener but the beverage companies are yet to sell drinks with the sweetener in the US.

Cargill and Merisant have notified the FDA that rebiana should be GRAS. However, the US's largest supplier of stevia Wisdom Natural Brands has said that its stevia-based sweetener Sweet Leaf is self-affirmed GRAS, without FDA notification, and the ingredient will be available in soda or food products by the end of the year.