Palm Oil in Food

Policy Position Statement

Key messages:

Australian, New Zealand, and international health and nutrition bodies recommend limiting our intakes of saturated fat. Palm oil contains a high proportion of such fat.

One of the key impacts in countries and regions where palm oil is produced is deforestation. The impacts of deforestation include greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming and biodiversity loss.

Recommendation 12 of the Australian Government's 2011 *Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy* called for the naming of individual sources of oils added to foods so that the public can make informed food purchase decisions specifically relating to palm oil.

Key policy positions:

1. All individual oil sources on food labels should be declared, including the country of origin, to assist the public in making food choices in keeping with the Dietary Guidelines.
2. Transparent labelling of palm oil will provide further impetus for developing a sustainable palm oil industry as customers demand, and will have benefits for reducing the negative environmental, social and economic impacts of palm oil production, which is essential for improving population health.
3. Campaigns to raise public awareness of the detrimental effects of palm oil production and consumption on human and planetary health need to be developed and funded.

Audience: Federal, State and Territory Governments, policymakers and program managers, PHAA members, media.

Responsibility: PHAA Food and Nutrition Special Interest Group

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Note: The mass production of palm oil has caused significant deforestation, habitat loss and ecological imbalances in the countries in which it is grown. It has also contributed to global greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution and degradation. This in turn creates adverse impacts for food security, population health and global health equity. Consequently, this policy should be read in conjunction with other PHAA policy position statements on the food supply and its relation to the environment, including: The Food System, Diet and the Environment; Ecologically Sustainable Diets; and Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security.

Policy position statement

PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Although now more than a decade old with no action initiated by the Australian Government, Recommendation 12 of the Labelling Logic Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy advocates for the labelling of individual sources of oils added to foods so that the public are able to make informed food purchasing decisions.[1]
2. The use of palm oil has negative consequences for health and the environment, as well as social and economic factors.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

3. Palm oil is produced predominately in Indonesia (57% of world production) and Malaysia (27% of world production).[2]
4. Worldwide palm oil production has grown from 42 million tonnes in 2008 to 71 million tons in 2018 over the past 10 years[2] and demand is expected to continue to rise[2]
5. Between 60%[3] and 70%[4] of all palm oil is used in food production , and 50% of all packaged and processed foods contain palm oil or its derivatives[4].This is because it has a number of favourable properties including:[5, 6]
    a. Low price compared to other vegetable oils
    b. No trans-fat content
    c. Relatively high smoke point
    d. Resistance to oxidation improving shelf life
6. Remaining semisolid at room temperature. However, palm oil contains a high proportion of saturated fat.
7. The Dietary Guidelines for Australians recommend that we limit our intakes of saturated fat.[7] This echoes advice provided in the New Zealand Eating and Activity Guidelines for Adults,[8] Dietary Guidelines for Americans,[9] World Health Organization[10] and the Heart Foundation.[11]

8. These recommendations are based on reviews that find good evidence of an association between saturated fat intake and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

9. There have been a number of studies specifically investigating the role of palm oil in cardiovascular disease risk but few have been of a high quality and many have been conducted or funded by the palm oil industry.[12]

10. The most recently published, independent systematic review relating to palm oil effects on cardiovascular health, showed marginal adverse effects on triglycerides, LDL-Cholesterol and HDL-Cholesterol in comparison to mono- and poly-unsaturated fatty acids.[13] The authors concluded that further research was needed to provide policy guidance.

11. Palm oil is a significant ingredient in ultra-processed foods and beverages (UPFBs) and creates sizeable negative health and environmental impacts[14]. It is estimated that UPFBs account for at least 42% of the total dietary energy consumption of Australians, thereby exacerbating the already considerable levels of premature death and disability caused by obesity and chronic noncommunicable diseases[15].

12. Concern has also been raised regarding the increasing use of palm oil in UPFB production, and its associated consumption, because of possible carcinogens created in the palm oil refining process. [4, 16, 22]

13. Deforestation is one of the key environmental impacts in palm oil producing countries and regions, the effects of which include greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming and biodiversity loss, including the decline of the orangutan population.[3] Global warming and its many ecological consequences also threaten population health.[17]

14. In addition, there are a range of economic and social benefits and harms that accompany palm oil production and much effort has been devoted to encouraging a sustainable palm oil industry.[3, 18, 19] Considerable work is being conducted to develop and implement global standards for the sustainable production of palm oil[20] with a view to protecting the health of diverse local, regional and global ecosystems, as well as that of individuals and communities dependent upon those ecosystems. However, only 20% of global palm oil is currently certified as being sustainably grown.(ref)[21]

15. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including number 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing and number 15 – Life in Land.

PHAA seeks the following actions:

16. All individual oil sources on food labels should be declared, including the country of origin, to assist the public in making food choices in keeping with the Dietary Guidelines.

17. Transparent labelling of palm oil products will provide further impetus to develop the sustainable palm oil industry as customers demand, and will have benefits for reducing the negative environmental, social and economic impacts of palm oil production, which in turn is essential for population health.

18. Campaigns to raise public awareness of the detrimental effects of palm oil production and consumption on human and planetary health need to be developed and funded.

PHAA resolves to:

19. Advocate for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.

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