

The European Vegetarian Union (EVU) is the voice of the growing number of Europeans choosing vegetarian and vegan products over animal-based nutrition. Its aim is to make vegetarian and meat-reduced lifestyles safe for consumers, producers and traders and provide adequate information on related health issues, as well as on plant health, animal health and welfare and environmental protection, with reference to a vegetarian lifestyle. The EVU is also the organisation backing the V-Label (www.v-label.eu), a voluntary certified labelling scheme. The EVU is registered in the Register of Interest Representatives (No. 109356110578-03).

Position Paper · March 2015

Plant Milk Containing Calcium-rich Algae: Fit for Organic Labelling

This paper outlines the expectations of the European vegetarian and vegan movement on a specific aspect related to the reform of the legislative framework on organic farming and food. It serves as a position paper for the legislative debate on a Commission proposal for a Regulation on Organic Farming (COM(2014) 180 final of 24 March 2014).

The EVU welcomes the discussion about the further development of the Regulation on Organic Farming. Organic farming offers great potential to make European agriculture more sustainable. Thus, it should be encouraged by a balanced legal framework. This applies in particular to the reasonable labelling of organic foods.

In this respect, the EVU takes the view that one aspect of the Commission proposal is in need of clarification. The current text entails that enriching the calcium content of plant milks¹ by adding the algae lithothamne – algae rich in calcium – puts these products in danger of being deemed unfit for organic labelling.

Therefore, the EVU invites the relevant European institutions to ensure that the practice of adding lithothamne to plant milks does not exclude these milks from being labelled as organic. This could be achieved by replacing the text “algae, including seaweed” with the text “algae, including seaweed and lithothamne” in Annex II Part IV No. 2.2.4 b) iii) of the proposal COM(2014)180.

The wording of the current organic farming regulation, which remains unaltered in the Commission’s proposal, has led to legal uncertainty as to whether plant milk produced with lithothamne can be labelled as organic. National authorities have at times considered lithothamne algae, calcified by natural processes, as minerals and not as algae plants due to their high calcium content.

¹ The commonly comprehensible and routinely applied term “milk” is used here for plant-based beverages, though the legally applicable term would be “drink”.

Lithothamne Algae

Lithothamne algae are used in the production of organic plant drinks in order to increase the calcium content of plant-based milk to equal that of cow's milk. They are sustainably harvested – predominantly in France and Iceland – where sufficiently abundant stocks are available. The algae are simply washed, dried and ground without the use of further ingredients or additives.

Organic Plant Milk

An increasing number of European consumers wish to purchase organic products for various reasons ranging from supporting organic farming as a more environmentally-friendly form of food production to health concerns. This also includes many of the growing number of Europeans preferring to consume vegetarian and vegan products instead of animal-based products for health, religious, ethical, or environmental reasons, as well as lactose intolerant consumers. Lactose-intolerance is a common food intolerance, with a prevalence of up to 70 percent, as in the case of Sicily.

Plant-based milks, such as soy, oat, spelt, rice and nut drinks, often constitute a central part of this group's nutrition and are used for the same purposes, for instance, as a breakfast beverage or as a baking and cooking ingredient. They are natural and healthy alternatives to cow's milk and are often important sources of fibre, vitamins, calcium and protein.

Explicitly mentioning lithothamne in the Organic Farming Regulation will ensure that consumers can continue to benefit from a wide range of plant-based milks and buy plant-based milks that are both certified as organic and rich in calcium.

Proposed Wording of an Amendment

Amendment

X, MEP

Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on organic production and labelling of organic products, amending Regulation (EU) No XXX/XXX of the European Parliament and of the Council [Official controls Regulation] and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 - COM(2014)180 final – Annex II Part IV No. 2.2.4 b) iii)

Text proposed by the Commission

– algae, including seaweed;

Amendment

– algae, including seaweed **and lithothamne;**

Justification

In numerous member states, the algae lithothamne is used as an ingredient in the production of organic plant-based milk alternatives, such as soymilk. Therefore, the possibility of using the algae lithothamne in organic products should be regulated on the EU level in a clear manner.