



Recycled Paperboard Technical Association®

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RPTA Statement on EU Mineral Oil Study (March 15, 2011)

Several media sources have recently reported on the results of a study conducted by European scientist Dr. Koni Grob that found extremely low levels of mineral oil hydrocarbons in some dry foods packaged in paperboard in Germany. Dr. Grob speculated that these impurities could have come from either the paperboard packaging or printing inks used on the outside of the packaging, or else from corrugated cardboard shipping containers.

European food safety agencies have described the data as “incomplete.” Nonetheless, the study has generated some attention from the press, which in some cases has irresponsibly connected recycled paperboard to health risks. In addition, a few European food manufacturers are reviewing their specifications for food packaging.

The United States has a robust legal and scientific system to regulate food and food packaging. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) long ago established that mineral oil that meets detailed purity specifications is acceptable for use in both food and food packaging applications. (See 21 CFR 178.3620.) Therefore, in the United States mineral oil can be applied directly to foods, provided that impurities are minimized. The World Health Organization standards also permit mineral oil to be used in food processing.

The safety of recycled paperboard used in food packaging is of the utmost priority to the paperboard industry. More than a decade ago, the North American paperboard industry, through the Recycled Paperboard Technical Association (RPTA), developed an extensive program to ensure that its products comply with U.S. laws governing food packaging. The system is based on rigorous controls and regular, ongoing testing that looks for a broad range of potential impurities that could be introduced through recycled fiber, including the type of mineral oil impurities of concern to FDA.

As we have for more than a decade, we will continue to evaluate scientific developments and the source stream for potential substances of concern to ensure that recycled paperboard can continue to be used safely in food packaging and other applications as an important component of an environmentally responsible and sustainable future.

Following are additional considerations relevant to Dr. Grob's study:

- A spokesman for the United Kingdom's Food Standards Agency (FSA) stated that, "The FSA is not aware of any firm evidence to suggest that there are food safety risks related to mineral oils in recycled food packaging...The research is interesting, but due to incomplete data the results have not demonstrated that mineral oils in food packaging represent a food safety risk."
- The levels found in some food samples tested in the EU study were extremely low (0.7 to 28 parts per million); no mineral oil impurities were detected in 25 percent of the food samples tested.
- The European Food Safety Agency is working on a safety evaluation to determine whether exposure to low levels of mineral oil hydrocarbons presents concern; the report is expected to be released in September 2011.
- Dr. Grob's report suggests that printing inks used in newspapers (and the subsequent recycling of newspapers into recycled paperboard) and printing inks used on the outside of food packaging are the primary sources of the hydrocarbons found in the food tested in the EU. The trend in North America has been to move away from mineral oil-based printing inks to those such as more renewable soy-based ink systems. Statistics on U.S. paper production and recovery rates indicate that one-third less newsprint is found in the U.S. recovered paper stream than in EU countries.

References include:

- "Industry and regulators taking steps to tackle mineral oil risk from packaging," FoodProductionQuality.com, March 9, 2011.
- RPTA, "Food Packaging Safety Guidance and Chemical Testing Protocol" (December 30, 2008), see <http://www.rpta.org/documents/RPTAProtocolwhitepaperrevised122008.pdf>.
- CEPI, "Mineral oils in food contact packaging," March 8, 2011.
- AF&PA, "Recovery of ONP/Mechanical Paper," www.paperrecycles.org as of March 14, 2011.

The Recycled Paperboard Technical Association is a non-profit association that brings together the expertise of paper mills worldwide that manufacture products from at least 90 percent recovered fiber. RPTA is dedicated to the improvement of the recycled paperboard industry. For additional information, please contact Deborah White, Executive Director, at dwhite@rpta.org.