

Should soy drinks be called "milk?"

Written by EarthTalk® From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine.
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Dear EarthTalk: Is the dairy industry really trying to stop soy milk makers from calling their products "milk?" They must feel very threatened by the preponderance of soy milks now available in supermarkets. -- Gina Storzen, Weymouth, MA

Indeed, just this past April the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF), a trade group representing dairy farms, petitioned the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) to crack down on what it calls "the misappropriation of dairy terminology on imitation milk products." NMPF has been asking for such a ruling for a decade, and argues that the soy industry's "false and misleading" labeling is now more common than ever.

According to NMPF president and CEO, Jerry Kozak, the FDA has let the issue slide so that the meaning of 'milk' and even 'cheese' has been "watered down to the point where many products that use the term have never seen the inside of a barn."

Furthermore, Kozak adds, the use of "dairy terminology" on non-dairy products can lead people to think they are eating healthier than they really are, especially because non-dairy products "can vary wildly in their composition and are inferior to the nutrient profile of those from dairy milk."

The website FoodNavigator-USA.com reports that on the other side of the Atlantic, the European Dairy Association (EDA) has also called for the term 'soy milk' to be replaced with 'soy drink'. EDA also suggests other options including 'soy beverage', 'soy preparation' and 'soy-based liquid'. It's no wonder the soy industry isn't quick to give up the milk moniker, given how catchy the alternatives could be!

Jen Phillips of Mother Jones magazine takes issue with the dairy industry's sense of ownership when it comes to terms like 'milk', 'cheese' and 'dairy'. "The word 'milk' has lots of uses and has been used for non-dairy milks like coconut for a long time," she reports, adding that consumers already know that soy milk isn't dairy milk. "Instead," she writes, "the move to ban 'milk' from non-dairy products is a transparent ploy by the NMPF to hurt the soybean industry that, thanks

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to increasingly health-conscious consumers and ethanol production quotas, is growing stronger every year.”

She also disagrees with Kozak’s claim that dairy milk is healthier than soy: “Actually, soy milk and dairy aren’t that different nutritionally, except for that milk is fattier,” she says, explaining that a cup of vanilla soy milk has 30 fewer calories than a cup of two percent cow’s milk. And while dairy does have twice the protein, soy milk has 10 percent more calcium. “It’s a bit of a toss-up nutritionally, but I’m lactose-intolerant so I’ll choose the ‘milk’ that doesn’t make me gassy and crampy.”

Phillips adds that, since 90-100 percent of Asians and 50 percent of Hispanics—two of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the U.S.—are lactose intolerant, “NMPF might want to think less about fighting soy and more about how they’re going to deal with people who can’t drink milk to begin with.”

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