

To the chair of the Food Standards Agency, Dame Deirdre Hutton 7th September 2007.

From:

Peter Melchett, Policy Director, Soil Association

Sally Bunday, MBE, Director, Hyperactive Children's Support Group

Kath Dalmeny, Deputy-Director, Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming

Dear Dame Deirdre,

We are appalled at the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) response to the research on the ill effects of food additives published on Thursday 6 September. In the words of Professor Jim Stephenson, who carried out the research, this establishes 'clear evidence that mixtures of certain food colours and benzoate preservatives can adversely influence the behaviour of children'. We believe that the FSA is letting down parents and children by failing to take a clear approach based on these scientific findings.

We understand that the FSA has spent considerable time consulting the manufacturers of highly processed food on the research findings in advance of its publication and, apparently, you have accepted the industry's position on this important issue. Can you confirm that no independent organisations representing the interests of the public, parents or children were consulted by you?

This is exactly how the now defunct Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) used to behave whenever food industry interests were being threatened by new scientific evidence. Part of the reason for the FSA being set up in the first place was to put an end to such pro-industry bias, and for you to be the independent champion of the public interest. We are forced to conclude that when it comes to food additives that you are not a food standards agency but a double standards agency.

The FSA claims to be a 'science based' body, but on this occasion we believe your report is misleading the public over the conclusions of this research. For example you say that eliminating certain additives from children's diets 'might' have beneficial effects. Professor Stephenson states that 'We now have clear evidence that mixtures of certain food colours and benzoate preservatives can adversely influence the behaviour of children'.

You are giving advice only to parents of 'children showing signs of hyperactivity or Attention Deficit Disorder', yet Professor Stephenson says that additives can cause an adverse effect on children's behaviour and cause 'hyperactivity in children in the general population'.

The FSA commissioned this research to end decades of argument over the issue, and to clear up the considerable confusion caused by adverse publicity in 2002 over a similar MAFF-commissioned study that had been shelved and not made public by MAFF or the FSA (the Isle of White study). A study by Professor Vyvyan Howard at the University of Liverpool also highlighted the adverse impact of a cocktail of additives.

Now that Professor Stephens' new findings in the study you commissioned have been peer-reviewed and published in the Lancet, you are clearly in a position to come to firm conclusions on this issue. The evidence shows that many children could enjoy considerable benefits from improved food quality and reduced exposure to problematic industrial chemicals routinely used in their food.

We believe that you are not only misrepresenting the science, but you are being unfair to parents by putting the burden to take action on this issue solely on them. In stark contrast, in your work on traffic light labelling, you fully acknowledge that food labels currently provide insufficient information, and in an indecipherable format, that do not allow parents to make an informed choice. For traffic light labelling, you acknowledge the responsibility of the industry to provide useful information and reformulate their food to make it healthier. Not so, it seems, when it comes to children's food and additives, which we now know, pose a significant risk.