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# FDA loosens rules for 'organic'

## Anheuser-Busch lager among products benefiting

By SCOTT J. WILSON  
LOS ANGELES TIMES

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With the "USDA Organic" seal stamped on its label, Anheuser-Busch calls its Wild Hop Lager "the perfect organic experience."

"In today's world of artificial flavors, preservatives and factory farming, knowing what goes into what you eat and drink can just about drive you crazy," the Wild Hop Web site says. "That's why we have decided to go back to basics and do things the way they were meant to be . . . naturally."

But Anheuser-Busch got the organic blessing from federal regulators even though Wild Hop Lager uses hops grown with chemical fertilizers and sprayed with pesticides. Demand for organic food in the United States is booming as consumers seek products that are healthier for them and friendlier to the environment. Sales have more than doubled in the past five years, reaching \$16.9 billion last year, according to the Organic Trade Association in Greenfield, Mass.

But with big companies entering what was formerly a mom-and-pop industry, new questions have been raised about what exactly goes into organic food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed a sweeping rule change that would allow 38 nonorganic ingredients to be used in organic foods. Because of the broad uses of these ingredients -- as spices, colorings and flavorings, for example -- almost any type of manufactured food could be affected.

Organic food advocates have fought to block all or parts of the new rule, saying that it would allow food makers to mislead consumers.

Many nonorganic ingredients, including hops, are already being used in organic products, thanks to a USDA interpretation of the Organic Foods Protection Act of 1990. But two years ago, a federal judge disagreed with how the USDA was applying the law and gave the agency until today to name the nonorganic ingredients it would allow.

Organic food supporters had hoped the USDA would allow only a small number of substances and were dismayed last month when the agency released the proposed list of 38 ingredients.

"Adding 38 new ingredients is not just a concession by the USDA, it is a major blow to the organic movement in the U.S. because it would erode consumer confidence in organic standards," said Carl Chamberlain, a research assistant with the Pesticide Education Project in Raleigh, N.C.

In addition to hops, the list includes 19 food colorings, two starches, sausage and hot dog casings, fish oil, chipotle chili pepper, gelatin, and a host of obscure ingredients (one, for instance, is a "bulking agent" and sweetener called fructooligosaccharides).

Casings for sausages and hot dogs and fish oil have drawn attention.

Casings are intestines from cows, pigs or sheep, and have been used for centuries to wrap meat into sausages and frankfurters.

While the casings are a tiny portion of the overall sausage, organic purists object to eating anything from animals that are raised on conventional farms, where animals may be housed in tight quarters and given antibiotics and growth hormones.

Fish oil has drawn objections because it could carry high levels of heavy metals and other contaminants, said Jim Riddle, a former member of the National Organic Standards Board. But fish oil producers said such contaminants can be screened out.

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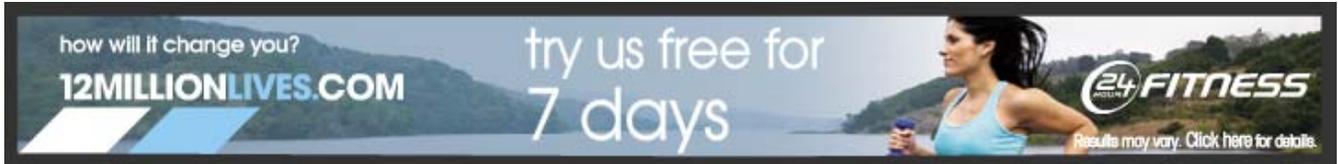
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