

Opinion: Time to rethink using palm oil

By Joel Brinkley

What's so wrong with palm oil, from the palm trees that bear fruit, not coconuts?

Well, if you listen to environmentalists and animal-rights advocates along with nutrition and health experts, they'll tell you it's something close to poison.

Once the United States and other Western countries began condemning and banning trans-fat oils a few years ago, palm oil became a popular substitute. You can find it in shampoo, lipstick, soap and a host of snack and other foods, including some ketchups, margarine, chewing gum, candy bars and cooking oil.



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Oil-palm trees, as they're called, are grown primarily in Indonesia and Malaysia, and that's where the problems begin. To create oil-palm farms, the two states have cleared millions of acres of tropical forest. In all of the 1980s, Indonesia cleared 674,000 acres, but by 2009 the total had reached 18 million. The two states, together, have clear cut an area roughly the size of Denmark, an environmental journal reported – all to plant oil-palm plantations. And they say they plan to double that acreage in the years ahead.

Well, that alone enraged environmentalists and animal-rights activists. After all, trees are important air-quality filters. Photosynthesis absorbs carbon dioxide and emits oxygen. But when you cut down a tree, nearly all of that stored carbon dioxide is released back into the atmosphere.

When you cut down millions of trees, as Indonesia and Malaysia have in recent years for oil-palm plantations, the plantations are “projected to contribute more than 558 million metric tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere” by 2020 – exacerbating the world’s climate-change conundrum, a Stanford University study reported.

But what about the animals and indigenous people who lived in these former forests? Animal-rights advocates are publicizing strident declarations about the possible pending extinction of the orangutan, 80 percent of which live in Indonesia. Only an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 are left.

“What we see is a contest between orangutans and palm oil for home,” Sri Suci Utami Atmoko of Jakarta’s National University, said, talking to Thailand’s Nation newspaper.

To make this point, Greenpeace created a grotesque online advertisement showing an office worker sitting at his desk, opening a Kit Kat candy bar. Instead of pulling out a bar of chocolate, he finds a hairy orangutan finger.

“Nestle, maker of Kit Kat,” Greenpeace says, “uses palm oil from companies that are trashing Indonesian rain forests, threatening the lives of local people and pushing orangutans toward extinction.” (The ad notes that in the U.S., Nestle, a Swiss company, does not license or produce Kit Kat candy bars.)

All of that’s bad enough. Trans fats are dangerous food additives that lead to coronary-artery disease, numerous studies have shown. Palm oil is not a trans fat, but it is 40 percent to 50 percent saturated fat, another unhealthy

substance. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned recently that “palm oil is not a healthy substitute for trans-fats” because a government study showed that the saturated fatty acids found in palm oil “are associated with elevated heart-disease risk factors.” The World Health Organization came to a similar conclusion.

But most products simply list their palm oil as “vegetable oil,” so customers have no idea what they’re eating. Some countries are trying to change that and require palm oil to be described as what it actually is.

Decrying the many complaints about palm oil, an organization called the Rainforest Action Network is staging loud, public campaigns against Smucker’s, Heinz, Kellogg’s, Pepsi, Campbell Soup, and Mars and Hershey candies, among other food companies. The organization says the campaign is intended to remove what it calls “conflict palm oil” from “America’s snack foods.”

Some companies are already listening. Unilever, a British company that manufactures soap, shampoo and margarine using palm oil, announced last month that it intends to trace the source for all its palm oil by the end of 2014. The company is said to be working to ensure that its oil comes from so-called “sustainable” sources. Proctor & Gamble and Nestle have made similar promises.

And Saetre, a Norwegian biscuit maker, says it has stopped using palm oil in its Digestive and Marie biscuits because of the associated environmental problems. It’s using sunflower-seed oil instead.

Trans fat was bad enough. But to replace it with a product that produces such manifold health, environmental and other problems is a crime. The industry’s largest trade group acknowledged last month that “the palm oil industry has suffered from a bad reputation” and promised to find ways to

reform.

I wish you the best of luck.

Joel Brinkley will not be writing for a while because he has left Stanford University and moved to Washington, D.C., to work for the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction.