NCA Statement on NIOSH Recommendations

The National Coffee Association (NCA) maintains that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommendations on workplace exposure to diacetyl and 2,3-pentanedione are exceedingly and unnecessarily low. Those recommendations are unchanged from NIOSH’s draft recommendations, which were not adopted by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the nation’s chief workplace safety agency. OSHA currently has put forth no permissible exposure level and, in fact, withdrew an earlier proposed rulemaking on diacetyl exposure. There is no reason to believe that OSHA’s position would change following its rejection of the same NIOSH recommendations in draft form.

Diacetyl is a compound created naturally in cooking and fermentation. Thus, it is created when making butter, cheese, milk, yogurt, whiskey, wine, beer, vinegar, roasted coffee, processed tomato products, citrus juices, and a wide variety of other foods and beverages. It gives butter its taste and certain ales their distinctive flavors. Until recently, artificial diacetyl was commonly used as a flavoring agent. 2,3 – pentanedione is chemical cousin of diacetyl also used to give foods a butter flavor and often used as a diacetyl substitute.

Coffee has been roasted, at times under less than ideal conditions, for centuries, and no evidence of widespread disease has been recorded. More importantly, overwhelming scientific evidence does not support the premise that exposure to diacetyl or 2,3-pentanedione alone, created naturally in the roasting and grinding of unflavored coffee, increases the risk of obstructive lung disease. Today’s well-established practices in coffee roasting and manufacturing also minimize worker exposure to fumes from coffee roasting. Diacetyl and 2,3-pentanedione, in fact, are particularly volatile, and can thus dissipate rapidly when created in cooling or heating, further minimizing exposure potential.

The NCA strongly encourages its members throughout the industry to meet and exceed all safety and health regulations to protect the health and well-being of their employees. We also encourage them to employ state-of-the-art equipment, engineering controls and safety protocols. We advise remaining engaged by following the scientific evidence regarding potential workplace hazards and, when appropriate, consulting with industry experts and scientific or governmental bodies to incorporate testing, measurement techniques and safety recommendations. Among such recommendations is OSHA’s own requirement for worker protective measures under its General Duty Clause which, for volatile organic compounds (VOC) like diacetyl and 2,3-pentanedione, includes adequate ventilation and environmental controls. The NCA recommends that all industry members comply fully with OSHA safety measures.

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