

WP4(a): Making Date Labels Work

The date labelling of food serves a number of roles. It enables consumers to discern the freshness and safety of packaged foodstuffs, and facilitates the communication of information about food safety and quality by regulators, manufacturers and retailers.

However, concern has recently emerged that labels are not performing their intended function. Consumers are thought to be placing themselves at risk of microbiological food poisoning (Hutton 2009) or are wasting edible food (WRAP 2008). Manufacturers may be misapplying 'use-by' labelling to products that pose little or no microbiological risk or are overly conservative in determining the end of shelf-life (Hough 2010). For their part, regulators may be providing insufficient or unclear advice on how distinctions between different labels should be made, and may need to reconsider the form and role of labelling.

Workpackage 4 (a) of the CONANX project explores how date labels are made to work at each stage of food production and consumption. The questions the project seeks to answer are:

1. What kinds of risks are managed through date labelling and by whom?
2. How are the roles and responsibilities of consumers in managing food risk performed in policy, by manufacturers, in the media or by consumers?
3. What is the role of date labelling in consumer understandings of food safety?
4. How do date labels function as a technology? How does the calculation and effectiveness of food safety labelling incorporate and require particular models of consumer behaviour?

The first stage of the research will focus on consumer understandings of date labelling. Focus groups will be undertaken with consumers in Sheffield and Norfolk. The groups will be stratified by life stage and socio-demographic status. The second strand of the study will consist of a series of semi-structured interviews with policy makers, manufacturers, retailers and food safety scientists.

The output of the project will include academic publications, a report to participants in the research and a summary of key findings for policy makers.

For more information about the project, please contact Dr Richard Milne