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Should firms be allowed to label potassium chloride as 'potassium salt'? NuTek petitions the FDA

By Elaine Watson+, 01-Jul-2016

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Allowing companies to label potassium chloride as 'potassium salt' on food labels would 'demystify' the ingredient for consumers and help the industry achieve the dual goals of lowering sodium and increasing potassium, argues a citizen's petition filed by NuTek Food Science.

The FDA's plan to include potassium as one of the nutrients that must be listed on the [Nutrition Facts panel](#) coupled with its [new sodium reduction targets](#) has focused attention on potassium chloride (KCL) – probably the best-known salt replacer.

But its name is putting consumers - and therefore manufacturers – off, argues NuTek, which has patented a wet chemistry process using label-friendly carriers (rice flour, maltodextrin or wheat flour) that suppresses its metallic taste without requiring companies to add expensive flavor masking ingredients.

In the [petition](#), to which the FDA must respond within 180 days, NuTek president and COO Brian Boor explains: "NuTek is requesting that the Commissioner issue guidance (as opposed to rulemaking) recognizing 'potassium salt' to be an additional common or usual name (as opposed to the exclusive name), so that entities will be able to voluntarily choose if and/or when to implement the use of 'potassium salt' in their labeling – instead of being required to use 'potassium salt' by a specified compliance deadline."

Although potassium chloride is hardly new, adds Boor, "There is compelling evidence that many consumers are confused and/or misled by the name potassium chloride... A statistically significant number of consumers lack familiarity with the term and often mis-associate it with chlorine or other chemicals.

"Allowing entities to voluntarily label potassium chloride as 'potassium salt' encourages entities to make healthier food while demystifying potassium chloride for consumers. The proposed alternate name 'potassium salt' more closely reflects reasonable consumer expectations of the ingredient and more accurately describes the basic nature of the ingredient."

NuTek: Consumers don't like 'chemical-sounding' names

To support its arguments, NuTek cites a national consumer survey of 466 Americans conducted by Ipsos in March 2016 in which 35% harbored 'somewhat negative to very negative' thoughts about potassium chloride (vs 23% who felt positively and 42% who were neutral), while significant numbers felt potassium salt was 'more appetizing,' 'less processed,' 'safer to consume,' and 'healthier' than potassium chloride, which many described as 'chemical-sounding.'

It also showed that perceptions of potassium chloride improved considerably after consumers were told what it was, which Boor said provided further evidence that the name – rather than the ingredient – was the issue (although some observers point out that this also supports the argument that education, not a name change, is what is needed).

While the FDA [rejected](#) a high-profile attempt by the corn refining lobby to rename high fructose corn syrup as 'corn sugar' via a citizen's petition, it did allow firms to call low erucic rapeseed oil 'canola oil' in the 1980s, observed one industry source.

The source also noted that while the sugar lobby was viscerally opposed to the 'corn sugar' petition, the potassium salt petition does not have any immediately obvious opponents (FoodNavigator-USA has contacted the Salt Institute for comment but has not heard back).

Industry reaction

So what do dietitians and nutritionists think?

Las Vegas-based registered dietitian (RD) Andy Bellatti told FoodNavigator-USA that while NuTek's motives were not wholly altruistic, it made a valid argument: "While NuTek clearly has a vested interest in this, I think it is important to demystify ingredients as much as possible for consumers. Sodium chloride shows up on ingredient lists as 'salt', so it makes sense that potassium chloride should also show up on ingredient lists as 'potassium salt.'"

However, agreeing to change the name of something just to make it sound 'less chemical-sounding' might set an unwelcome precedent by reinforcing consumer misconceptions (ie. if I can't pronounce it, it's bad for me), he added: "It is



Andy Bellatti: 'Sodium chloride shows up as salt on labels, so it makes sense that potassium chloride should also show up as potassium salt.'

one thing to avoid controversial additives due to health concerns, but shunning an ingredient simply because it 'sounds too chemical-y' is unwarranted. Water is technically "dihydrogen monoxide." Vitamin C's scientific name is 'ascorbic acid.'

Dr Marion Nestle, Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, also agreed that NuTek was right in that "from a chemical standpoint, potassium chloride is a salt."

But she cautioned: "Is it the role of the FDA to change regulations in order to help companies market products? I don't think so."

As for getting more potassium into the diet, she said: "One way to

help reduce blood pressure is to eat foods rich in potassium, which mostly means vegetables and fruits. These also provide lots of other nutrients and phytochemicals that help with blood pressure and good health in general—benefits that you can't get from salt substitutes."



Dr Marion Nestle: "Is it the role of the FDA to change regulations in order to help companies market products?"

RD: 'It's not FDA's role to codify the renaming of ingredients to meet consumer or industry desires'

Catherine Adams Hutt, PhD, RD, chief science & regulatory officer at Sloan Trends and principal at consultancy RdR

Solutions said she could see NuTek's point but was not sure it was FDA's "role to codify the renaming of ingredients to meet consumer or industry desires."

However, NuTek's Boor told FoodNavigator-USA that demystifying an ingredient that would help to increase potassium intakes and reduce sodium was squarely in line with FDA's stated policy goals, and said he expected food manufacturers and consumer groups to support some flexibility over naming conventions.

While some stakeholders say the answer is just to educate consumers about potassium chloride, he said, "Who would be in charge of that education process? Besides, calling it 'potassium salt' would be a form of education, as it tells consumers what it actually is."

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"Potassium consumption should be at least 4,700 mg per day whereas most people consume less than half that," says NuTek president and COO Brian Boor. "Meanwhile, sodium consumption should be limited to 2,300 mg or less, but most people still eat way more than that, so replacing salt (sodium chloride) with potassium chloride is a good way of helping things get back in balance."

The challenge, however, is getting food manufacturers to see that things have changed dramatically since they tested the first generation of KCL-based salt replacers, says Boor.

“The biggest challenge is getting through the door. A lot of companies have negative feelings about potassium chloride because they tested the first generation of KCl-based salt replacers and they didn’t like them. But if we can just get them to try our products, they are convinced.”
