If a Foodstuff is Gluten-Free, is it also Wheat-Free?

Comaine van Zijl, Harris Andrew Steinman

FACTS, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Abstract

The Regulations Relating to the Labelling and Advertising of Foodstuffs (R.146/2010, as amended) define a list of common food allergens and give clear guidance regarding how to declare and control these foods. One of the common allergens, significant cereals, is a grouping of grains: wheat, rye, barley, oats, and cross-hybrids of these cereals.

An alarming number of queries received by FACTS pertain to the significant cereal group. Questions such as the following are often asked:
"Are wheat and gluten the same allergen?"
"What is the difference between wheat and gluten?"
"When is a 'free from' claim permitted, in each case?"
"What is the legal limit for each?"
"When and how must precautionary labelling be applied?"

This is an indication that there is widespread confusion, and that the intent and application of regulations pertaining to significant cereals are poorly understood.

The confusion is possibly rooted in an incomplete understanding of the three major conditions triggered by significant cereals; and it may have been further exacerbated by the consolidation of all gluten-containing cereals into a single group – 'significant cereals'.

The presentation identifies possible root causes for this lack of clarity and seeks to address the knowledge gaps contributing to it. It highlights the major adverse reactions associated with significant cereals, the differences between them, the clinical mechanisms involved, and the consumer groups concerned. It then overlays the regulatory requirements and explains why correctly applying them is crucial to ensuring that consumers receive the information they require to make safe purchasing decisions. Finally, it gives a snapshot of current regulatory compliance.

Biography: Comaine van Zijl

Comaine, a FACTS technical consultant, is a food technologist and experienced allergen management consultant and trainer. Comaine is a firm believer in making food safety and allergen management plans simple and rational. There is nothing in life that energises her as much as seeing the inside of a food factory, big or small, and understanding how their process flows from raw materials to finished products.