

KFC to use trans-fat-free oil

NEW YORK (AP) - After two years of secret taste tests, KFC said Monday it would stop frying chicken in artery-clogging trans fats, but New York City restaurants being urged to do the same say it's not so easy.

KFC's announcement, which won praise from consumer advocates, came an hour ahead of a public hearing on a New York health department proposal to ban the unhealthy fats in the nation's restaurant capital.

Industry leaders dished up a plateful of reasons why such a plan shouldn't be adopted.

The move would be a "recipe for disaster that could be devastating to New York City's restaurant industry," said E. Charles Hunt, executive vice president of the New York State Restaurant Association.

The shift by KFC and a handful of other fast food chains — and the effort by New York health officials — mark an aggressive crackdown on an ingredient that is consumed in large doses around the country.

An average American eats 4.7 pounds of trans fats a year, and the oil is used as a shortening in baked goods like cookies, crackers and doughnuts, as well as in deep frying. Experts say a ban in New York would reverberate across the country because the city's food industry is so large.

The proposal would have taken an especially harsh toll on KFC, but the company said that by next April, all 5,500 of its U.S. restaurants



will have switched from trans fat-rich partially hydrogenated vegetable oil to a new soybean oil believed to be less likely to cause heart disease.

Some KFC sites have already made the switch in secret trials to see if customers would notice a difference. They did not, and KFC President Gregg Dedrick said he was confident the switch won't prompt complaints about taste.

"There is no compromise," he said at a Manhattan news conference. "Nothing is more important to us than the quality of our food and preserving the terrific taste of our product."

Health advocates applauded the company's switch. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, which sued KFC last spring over the trans fat content of its food, announced Monday that it was withdrawing from the lawsuit.

"Colonel Sanders deserves a bucket full of praise," said CSPI executive

director Michael Jacobson. "If KFC, which deep-fries almost everything, can get the artificial trans fat out of its frying oil, anyone can."

Burger King also said Monday that it hopes to begin testing trans fat-free cooking in some restaurants within 90 days. Wendy's has already switched to a zero-trans fat oil. McDonald's had announced that it intended to do so as well in 2003, but has yet to follow through.

The New York hearing on the proposed trans fat ban was packed with doctors and paid industry spokespersons. Long lines at the building's security checkpoint and an overflowing hearing room might have deterred ordinary citizens or restaurant owners from speaking.

But industry representatives like Hunt spoke out.

"This ban threatens popular dishes and affordable menus," he said. "The city needs to get serious about working with, not against, our restaurant owners."

He and others said a ban

would leave cooks unable to find proper replacement ingredients, and force some to switch to bad alternatives.

Sheila Cohn Weiss, director of nutrition policy for the National Restaurant Association, suggested that restaurant owners in need of a quick fix would simply switch to another unhealthy substance like palm oil, which contains unhealthy amounts of saturated fat.

"This is a switch that cannot happen immediately," she said. KFC has concerns about supply, too.

Dedrick said KFC and the creator of the new oil, the Monsanto Corp., had to work with seed oil processors to persuade farmers to grow more of the special soybeans used in the product. Among other things, farmers were offered a price premium to grow the new soybeans.

Monsanto spokesperson Chris Horner said he expected the farmland devoted to the company's new seed to triple next year to 1.5 million acres, up from 500,000 acres this year and 100,000 in 2005.

Still, he added, demand for trans-fat-free oils has the potential to outpace supply.

New York's health commissioner, Dr. Thomas Frieden, said officials have heard the supply argument before and rejected it as unsupported.

"We're confident that there is ample supply of healthy trans fat alternatives," Frieden said, although he added that officials might consider giving restaurants more time. The current proposal is an 18-month transition.

Louis Nunez, president of New York's Latino Restaurant Association, said a quick survey by his group shows at least 980 of its members don't know what trans fats are. "If this goes in with no education, there is going to be an avalanche of fines," Nunez said.

Even with the development of new oils, finding replacements for every recipe may be tough.

KFC said that even after its changeover, some menu items will continue to contain artificial trans fats, including its popular biscuits.

Although not fried, the biscuits contain a trans fat shortening that has proven difficult to replace. Dedrick said the company would continue trying to develop a substitute.

Freed slaves' data hits Web

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - Records the Freedmen's Bureau used to reconnect families — from battered work contracts to bank forms — will be placed online in part of a new project linking modern-day Blacks with their ancestors.

The Virginia Freedmen Project plans to digitize more than 200,000 images collected by the Richmond bureau, one of dozens of offices established throughout the South to help former slaves adjust to free life.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine recently unveiled the project and a state marker near the site where the bureau once stood in downtown Richmond.

"This is the equivalent for African-Americans of Ellis Island's records being put up," said Kaine, who was joined by Mayor L. Douglas Wilder, the nation's first elected Black governor and a grandson of slaves.

Researchers will eventually transfer data from all of the southern states to an online database, said Wayne Metcalfe, vice president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, a partner in the project.

Records from Virginia should be ready to go online by the middle of next year, Metcalfe said.

"It was one of the larger states and one of the most complete collections available," he said. "It's a gold mine, as far as a genealogist is concerned."

About a half-million slaves were left to establish a new life following emancipation, Metcalfe said.

Established in 1865, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands — also called the Freedmen's Bureau — helped former slaves find clothes, food and jobs.

Bureaus kept meticulous records, documenting marriages and work histories. Those records will be scanned from microfilm and compiled into an electronic index families will eventually be able to access, Metcalfe said.

Twenty-four years removed from slavery in rural Virginia, Hawkins Wilson had established himself as a respected Texas minister. But there was something missing from his life as a free man: the mother and sisters he left behind.

In a letter dated May 11, 1867, he offered bureau officials details of his family's old home in Caroline County, and urged them to pass along a note to his sister, Jane.

"Your little brother Hawkins is trying to find out where you are and where his poor old mother is," reads the letter, which will be included in the database. "Your advice to me to meet you in Heaven has never (lapsed) from my mind."

Historians don't know if he ever found his family.

House

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Sen. Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts, who was the nation's first Black senator since Reconstruction, reveled in Patrick's victory. "I wouldn't say I'm surprised," said Brooke who served from 1967 to 1979. "He must have been an excellent campaigner. He led in the polls because he's been able to run a very skillful campaign. He will be a top notch governor."

Brooke was not as complimentary of the major political parties. "I say shame on both of the Houses, to tell you the truth," Brooke says. "Neither Republicans nor Democrats have done what they should have done. I feel very strongly about that. I've been very critical of my party and I've been very critical of the Democratic Party. They've both been a lot of talk. There's still a lot of discrimination in basic voting rights that are still there. The Democratic party is not a purest on this subject by any means."

If they don't come clean on these and other issues, Blacks must take action, observers insist.

Center for American Progress spokes-

woman Daniella Gibbs Leger says among the worst insults to African-Americans is the perception that they vote Democratic simply because that's what they know.

"Like every single other person, African-Americans vote their issues," said Leger. "If it happens to be one party or one ideology that fits with African-Americans, that doesn't make them different than anybody else. So, obviously, the leaders in Congress, be they Democrat or Republican, they need to be held accountable. And so if the new Congress comes in there and they've made a promise on minimum wage and other issues, they need to be held accountable."

Al Sharpton said, "Fortunately, the Congress runs every two years, we can punish those in '08 that get out of line. And we've got the presidential race coming. They cannot easily cross us realizing that we can build an 18-month strategy up that will really take them out. So, in many ways, the question is how much we are loud, clear and in demand. But I don't think we ought to relax and say we're there. We have to win for a reason, not just for a political season."

Suicide

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tal health professionals serve the Black community]," said Bell, who was not involved in the research.

Dr. Paula Clayton, medical director of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, pronounced it a landmark study that adds considerably to knowledge about suicide risks in Blacks and could improve prevention efforts.

Historically, suicide was taboo in the Black community going back to slavery times, at least partly because "it was really frowned on by the Black church," said Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a Harvard University psychiatry professor and race relations specialist.

"It was a stigma and it brought shame to your family."

Blacks "thought life was supposed to be hard for them," and that may have helped protect them from suicide, Poussaint said.

Interestingly, suicide attempts in the study were least common among Blacks in the South, where that mindset may linger from slavery times, he said.

While depression is strongly tied to suicidal behavior in Whites, anxiety disorders were more common than depression in Blacks who attempted suicide in the study. That is an important racial difference that could alert doctors to Black patients who might be contemplating suicide, Poussaint said.