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Thinking ahead to recycling when printing paper!

Since November of this year the Swiss supermarkets chains COOP and Migros have been printing some of their customer flyers with inks free of mineral oil. "Switzerland is one step ahead of us in this regard", said the President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), Jochen Flasbarth. "It has been proven that technology now makes it possible to use mineral oil-free inks in newspaper printing."

Analyses by the Swiss canton laboratory in Zurich in Autumn 2009 discovered that newspapers contain an average 3,000 mg of mineral oil per kg of newspaper, and the food packaging made from it contains 300 - 1,000 mg of mineral oil per kg. In their gaseous phase these mineral oils can migrate to foodstuffs - even through the intermediate packaging. Unprinted packaging made of recycled cardboard can, in effect, have 10 times more mineral oil content than virgin fibre cardboard packaging. Experts believe that the higher mineral oil content in recycled cardboard originates from the newspaper recycling process and the inks used. Traces of mineral oil have also been found in various foodstuffs in Germany in amounts well above a tolerable threshold. Such contamination of foodstuffs is undesirable on account of the high content of mineral oils with short chain and aromatic hydrocarbons. Short chain hydrocarbons are easily absorbed by the body so that toxicological limits can be exceeded through the frequent consumption of contaminated foodstuffs. Both UBA and the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) believe the migration of mineral oil from recycling paper and cardboard to foodstuffs must be minimised immediately.

By substituting other substances for printing inks with mineral oil content, Germany could also make an important step towards eliminating unwanted chemicals in the waste paper recycling loop. Sustainable consumer protection and environmental protection would thereby be taken into account. In ecological terms, packaging made of recycled waste paper is better than fresh-fibre packaging. German publishers and printers are called upon to apply the knowledge gained in Switzerland to the printing of publications in Germany.

Mineral oil-free printing inks can help to reduce the pollutants in closed loop recycling. UBA is planning large-scale printing tests to examine the serviceability and recyclability of these new inks to back up the results of Swiss findings on the production of high-quality, mineral-oil free printed products.

Further information and links:

Suggestions by Federal Institute for Risk Assessment:

http://www.bfr.bund.de/de/fragen_und_antworten_zu_mineraloel_uebergaengen_aus_verpackungsmaterialien_auf_lebensmittel-50470.html#topic_50469

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