

Is it not time to address problems before they happen?

An interview with Alex Waugh, director of the UK Flour Millers

by James Cooper, MAG Contributor



UK Flour Millers are justifiably reluctant to comment on the UK government folic acid consultation, understandably so, fortification is primarily a public health issue. James Cooper caught up with Director of UK Flour Millers Alex Waugh, for an industry perspective

The government announced a public consultation some while ago. Where are we on the matter of folic acid fortification, what's the timescale for the regulation?

Alex Waugh: Well, you're right. There's a lot of interest in the subject, and the idea of requiring flour to be fortified with folic acid has been in discussion in the United Kingdom for more than 20 years, since the late 1990s and some form of fortification is in place now in many countries around the world, although none in Europe.

Most of the flour produced in United States and Canada and other parts of South America, and other countries, does have folic acid added to it, but not in 10 European countries at present.

Why do you suppose the UK government and the European Union has been cautious to implement folic acid when according to the Food Fortification Initiative the evidence is there?

Alex Waugh: This is a matter less for European Union Commission and the European Parliament and more for individual member states. The UK government and the public health groups are well aware of and are convinced by the evidence in that folic acid does confer benefits, especially in terms of helping to prevent neural tube defects and has wanted to try and make some progress here.

There is that sort of public mood against adding things to food and at the same time there is, in the food world, a trend towards clean label: People don't like the look of anything added to their food. Additives have got a bad name. Folic acid is still is another ingredient on the list. And you know there are plenty of foodies who regard anything added as if it were bad. Even though it might benefit them, the raw food brigade and the anti-processing group.

I'm also not sure that all consumers are convinced either and politicians have to weigh both sides. The argument is that the group of beneficiaries, that is those involved in pregnancies that might be affected by NTDs, is relatively small. Don't

misunderstand me, not insignificant or anything like that, but it is just a relatively small number compared with the idea that would lead to everyone consuming the folic acid. So, you've got to go very broad in order to hit a small target. And I think that's the challenge. But there are clear benefits for a defined group.

It could well be that at some point, this year or next year, the UK government will consult the public on the possibility that folic acid should be added to flour. It's been promised for a while so it's definitely a possibility that it will come forward in 2021, perhaps 2022.

Given the current status of vaccines and the whole issue of mass medication versus mass nutrition, you might make a reasonable argument that is this not the time - if that if ever there was a time - to address problems before they happen?

Alex Waugh: Maybe five percent of our production is exported, less than that is imported, but there's a lot more products made with flour that's traded: bread and frozen dough, cakes and biscuits, pies and pasta, fish fingers, etc. There would be some trade challenges because other countries in Europe might reject the idea. There's quite a lot of detail to be worked through as to how that would work.

The whole prospect for our future is that we should be an island trading nation. Which means that goods move in and out, and so there are some challenges around what exactly, or how the legislation, would address that. That's not necessarily an insurmountable challenge, more a practical issue. But it looms larger when not everyone is convinced in the first place. We don't want to erect new barriers to trade.

And what about the millers, are they willing. What do they want?

Alex Waugh: I think they would. It's essentially a public health issue, with trade overtones as we just discussed. There will probably be a cost, and the cost is not cheap. But those

are secondary issues. First thing is - is it doable? Will it be mandatory? What's the mechanism? And then, it's okay if that's what we as a nation decide we want to do and how to make it work.

Will the consumer end up lifting the bill ultimately or do you think government would. What would happen?

Alex Waugh: However it's done, one way or another the consumer will pay for it. Whether that's through taxation or whether through market costs. Someone has to pay for it. I mean that's a bit of an ex-economist answer. It will be marginal price per loaf of bread and unmeasurable, it will be a tiny fraction, but with all these things, they are all tiny unless you have to pay for them.

At around UK£60 a kilo folic acid is relatively cheap, considering the very small fortification level, but when you're talking about millions of tonnes of wheat, what is cost impact?

Alex Waugh: If you're not paying for it doesn't seem like much at all, [set] against the public health benefit. On the other hand, if you're seeing, for the sake of argument, UK£100,000 - UK£200,000 coming off your profit annually, it might seem like quite a bit.

When was the last review of fortification?

Alex Waugh: In the early 1980s there was a review of flour fortification legislation, calcium and iron in the early 1990s. So there have been periodic reviews of the pros and cons. So far, the outcome has been to maintain the existing approach.

Perhaps the public mood has swung a little bit against this long list of ingredients. We had moved into a world that favoured the

emphasis on the personal, the individual. The thing about this kind of fortification programme is that it's about a collective benefit. That might be felt on an individual level for some people, but this absolutely won't by others. It about the National Public Health rather than being able to be discernible.

It's absolutely not about choice. It's the antithesis of choice. Depending on which side of the argument you sit, you might say well, we don't have a choice about which side of the road we drive on do we? We drive on one side because that is best for everyone. So there are limits to choice, and those who favour the approach say this is one small limitation on choice, that does no harm to anyone, but benefits many.

Why is it hard to get any comment from a miller on the subject?

Alex Waugh: We will wait for the consultation, it's quite a charged issue, as far as customers and consumers are concerned. I suspect they are more than happy to wait and for it to be dealt with across the industry rather than picking out individual businesses. It's a bit hard to avoid coming down one way or the other if pressed to comment, and as yet nothing has been decided, but they are likely to say yes, we should be thinking about public health, but it's not for the millers to make public health decisions.

Would wholemeal flour be included in the regulations?

Alex Waugh: If it's the idea to just add it to the existing recipe, and include it in the same product, then that would be added to white and brown and not to wholemeal. [By doing this] you would definitely reach a large number of people but there are some challenges around, for example gluten free, the regulations apply only to wheat flour, and so on.