

Fake news and falsehoods on food labels. The big “free-from” deception

“Free-from” claims are often used for persuading consumers that the absence of one ingredient makes the product better. The intention is to communicate that the excluded nutrient should be avoided because it is harmful, whereas its substitutes are better.

The comparative study entitled ***Palm oil free, but more saturates and less sustainable*** shows that the “**palm oil free**” message is deceiving for consumers.

We have chosen palm oil because it is a symbolic case. It is accused of being harmful to health because it is too rich in saturated fats, and of being poorly sustainable for the environment as it is perceived to be solely responsible for deforestation and as the main threat to biodiversity and local communities.

In the study, we show that **many products containing palm oil contain the same, if not lower, levels of saturated fats** compared to those in which palm oil has been removed, with its removal and absence being advertised on packaging and in communications.

We also demonstrate **the ingredient's greater sustainability compared to its vegetable and animal substitutes.**

The “palm oil free” claim **is misleading for consumers**. It leads them into believing that “free from” products are necessarily better for their health and the environment than those “with”.

Less palm, more saturates

The third edition of the study analyses 96 food products, divided into 10 categories, within which there is a comparison of the total and saturated fats present in 100 g of the “free from” and “with” palm oil product. As the data collected highlight, “free from” products have, on average, less total and saturated fats than “with” products.

Average levels of saturated fats by category of product (“with” and “free from” palm oil).

CATEGORY	Products “with palm oil”	Products “without palm oil”	AIDEPI AVERAGE ¹
Croissant/Braided pastry snack	8.9 gr / 100 gr	11.4 gr / 100 gr	10.8 gr / 100 gr
Frollini biscuits	6.5 gr / 100 gr	7.8 gr / 100 gr	4.5 gr / 100 gr
Healthy range frollini biscuits	2.5 gr / 100 gr	5 gr / 100 gr	4.5 gr / 100 gr
Snacks with biscuit and chocolate	13.5 g / 100 g	13.9 gr / 100 gr	7.8 gr / 100 gr
Packaged chocolate cake	14 gr / 100 gr	13.9 gr / 100 gr	/
Chocolate/cocoa cream-filled wafers	16.63 gr / 100 gr	20.6 gr / 100 gr	/
Breaded products	2.2 gr / 100 gr	3.2 gr / 100 gr	/
Ice Creams	10.4 gr / 100 gr	12.2 gr / 100 gr	/
Potato Crisps: of which “traditional” of which “cheese flavoured”	7.5 gr / 100 gr 14 gr / 100 gr	4.5 gr / 100 gr 2.9 gr / 100 gr	/
Other snacks: of which “plum cakes” of which “chocolate snacks”	2.4 gr / 100 gr 11.6 gr / 100 gr	2 gr / 100 gr 12.35 gr / 100 gr	7.8 gr / 100 gr

Source: our elaboration on food labels and the nutritional values shown.

As is apparent from the table, in the majority of categories and sub-categories analysed, products **containing palm oil** have lower average saturated fat levels than **“free from”** products. The product categories in which this trend emerges with a wider gap are Croissant/Braided pastry snacks, Healthy range Frollini biscuits and Chocolate cream-filled wafers. The **“palm oil free”** products, on the other hand, only show a lower average saturated fat value in 3 categories and 2 sub-categories out of 10.

It is also possible to provide two significant pieces of information:

- ◆ The saturated fats average in **“free from”** products is 10.18 grams, whereas it is 9.13 for **“with”** products;
- ◆ 63% of **“with palm oil”** products have average saturated fat levels that are lower than the average in **“free from”** products.

¹ In 2018 AIDEPI (Italian Association of Confectionery and Pasta Industries) merged with the Unione Italiana Food (Italian Union of Food). For reasons of convenience we will continue to refer to AIDEPI, as it has regularly elaborated the updated tables with the average nutritional values for some of the product categories on the market. To this end, the Association explains, on its own website, that “The tables are the result of a complex elaboration carried out by AIDEPI through a precise check of the nutritional values shown on the most sold products, using the market data provided by IRI. The average used is the arithmetical one of nutritional values available, in as much as, unlike the pondered one, it ensures more transparency, less variability and easier handling”.

Palm oil and Sustainability

The “**palm oil free**” claim is intended to lead consumers into believing that they are purchasing a more sustainable product. But is this really so?

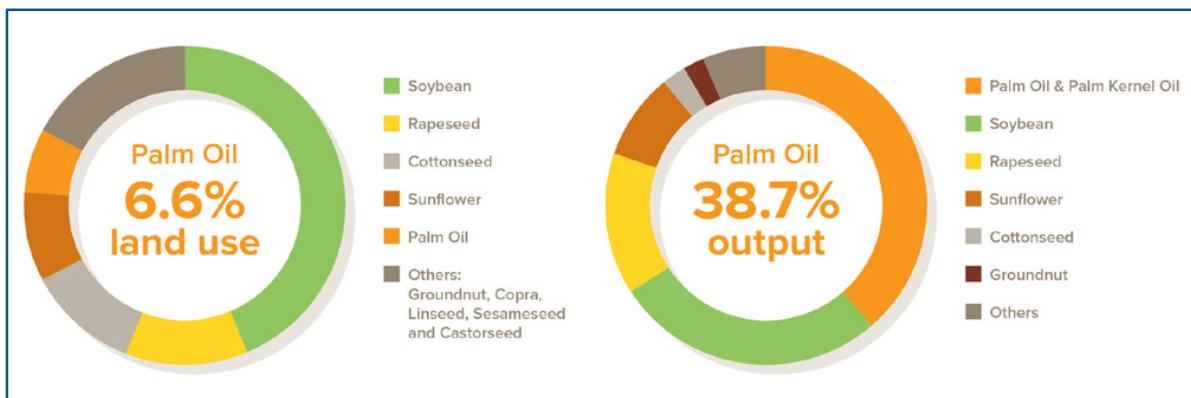
To verify this, we analysed different authoritative independent scientific studies commissioned by international and governmental bodies, and also some **Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs)** in order to measure the sustainability of some of the vegetable oils used in food production.

Palm oil turns out to be the most sustainable

Plantations competing with oil palms have a greater impact on the environment and on biodiversity. For example, the yield per hectare of oil palm is very high: approximately 3.8 tonnes per hectare (t/h). The yield of alternative oils, on the other hand, is by far lower: 0.8 t/h for rapeseed oil; 0.7 t/h for sunflower seed oil; 0.5 t/h for soybean oil (WWF 2016 data).

Palm oil production occupies 6% of land destined for the production of vegetable oils, but it is capable of meeting 38.7% of global demand, as shown in the figures below. Soy, for example, occupies 40% of the world's agricultural surface area dedicated to vegetable oils, but only produces 22% of total oil output.

Figure 1 – Land use and productivity of major vegetable oils



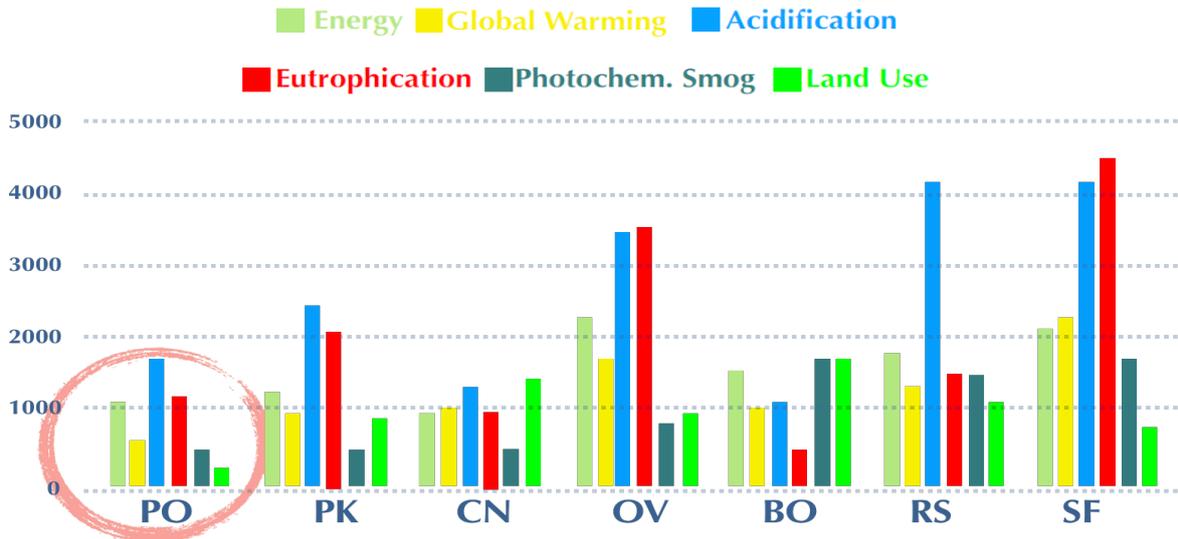
Source: IUCN 2018

The sustainable farming of oil palms can, moreover, help achieve some of the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, 17 targets introduced in 2015 with the aim of steering the sustainable development of our planet towards ambitious targets such as significantly reducing pockets of poverty, access to clean water and decent hygiene conditions, economic growth, job growth, the preservation of all life forms on earth and responsible consumption and production. The palm oil supply chain directly employs millions of individuals globally. Of these almost 7 million are in Indonesia and Malaysia alone, and it contributes to 1.8% and 3.8%, respectively, of the GDP of these countries. The development and prosperity that it has created has also led to higher levels of education and to a greater understanding of the need for sustainable practises.

The study also looked at two comparative **Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs)** that examine different vegetable oils. The LCA is an analysis that measures the effects on the environment

associated with a given product in every stage of its life cycle. In the LCAs examined, when it comes to the overall environmental impact, palm oil reveals itself to be better compared to its alternatives, in particular, if one considers the parameters: energy used, greenhouse gas emissions, photochemical smog and land exploitation. In the figure below these results are even more apparent.

Figure 2 - LCA comparison between vegetable oils



PO=palm oil, PK=palm kernel oil, CN=canola oil, OV=olive oil, BO=soybean oil, RS=rapeseed oil, SF=sunflower oil.
Source: Dumelin 2009

Conclusions

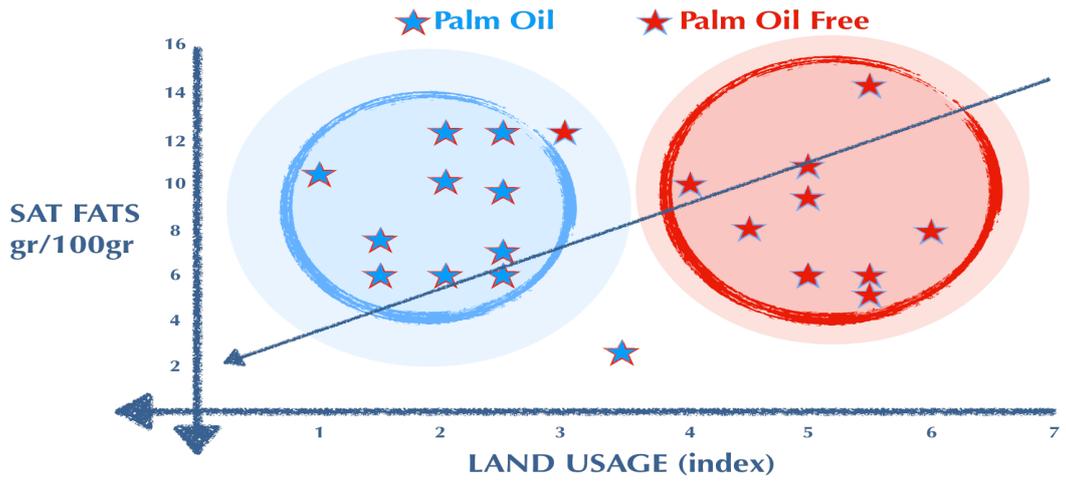
Substituting palm oil with other alternatives does not automatically coincide with lower total and saturated fat content, nor is there any noticeable improvement in sustainability.

The “palm oil free” claim therefore appears misleading to the consumer, responding to purely commercial logic.

The arguments put forward by many food companies, in support of the use of the “palm oil free” claim, are devoid of any scientific basis and ignore the facts. “Free from” puts pressure on consumers for commercial ends in order to influence their behaviour. Consumers are not provided with the information required in order to make a free choice.

In a further comparison on the relationship between saturated fats and environmental sustainability, the products “with” palm oil appear better because they are more sustainable and with a quantity of saturated facts that is the same if not lower than “free of” products. The index has been formulated taking into account the levels of land exploitation that have emerged in the LCAs.

Figure 3 - Saturated fat content and land use, based on the oils used in “with” and “palm oil free” products (2 categories: croissants and Frollini biscuits)



Source: our elaboration on data from labels and LCAs