

# New food packaging could be toxic and should be regulated, says Friends of the Earth

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Food packaging needs to have tighter regulation, says an environmental group. *Photo: Wayne Taylor*

New packaging technology created to improve the shelf life of food is potentially toxic and should be regulated, an environmental group has warned.

Nanomaterials used in packaging could leach into food and harm consumers, said Friends of the Earth campaigner Jeremy Tager. But food companies say such packaging, which is becoming available to them, has several benefits such as alerting shoppers to decay.

The lack of packaging regulations under the food standards code could place public safety at risk, said Mr Tager.

"There is a profound anti-regulatory approach. In Australia, we don't think about regulation until somebody starts falling over and dying, and that's unacceptable in terms of food safety."

As many as 80 per cent of food and packaging companies surveyed by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand said packaging rules under the code were "inadequate", "minimalistic at best" and "largely irrelevant", sparking fears among public safety advocates already concerned about nanotechnology.

The survey results, submitted to a Budget Estimates Committee in June, showed FSANZ was failing to protect consumers from risks linked with the use of nanomaterials in food packaging, Mr Tager said.

"Several studies suggest that nanomaterials in packaging can migrate into food, posing potential health risks. But FSANZ has taken no steps to ensure the safety of those materials," he said.

Food makers exporting to Europe were already complying with stringent packaging laws that are not replicated in Australia, he said.

"We want FSANZ to take a more proactive role in regulating nanomaterials in packaging and food, which is to operate on the basis that food must be assured safe before it's put on the market. That's the basic start."

The survey showed the food industry acknowledged the "lack of legislative requirements regarding the safety of unknown, new and emerging packaging materials". Some respondents were "actively investigating potential future uses" of nanotechnology.

FSANZ said it was not aware of any products in the market with nanomaterial packaging yet.

Nanomaterials are typically less than 100 nanometres, or 100,000 times less than the width of a human hair. Producers can use them to improve taste, texture or appearance of food.

They are used in packaging to extend the shelf life of food, reduce microbes, and act as indicators for when food goes bad.

FSANZ said it was aware of concerns about chemical migration and had launched a review of the existing legislation. It was monitoring and conducting its own research into nanomaterials.

"If changes to our processes were required as the result of any new evidence we would make these changes," a spokeswoman said. "Consumers should be reassured that Australia has one of the safest food supplies in the world."

The Australian Food and Grocery Council, whose members took part in the survey, said it supported the review to ensure it remained relevant to producers using the latest technologies.

But the council favoured minimum effective regulation based on safety outcomes. It refused to disclose information on nanotechnology use because it related to particle size and not safety.

A [Friends of the Earth report released in May](#) said the number of products containing nanomaterials was rapidly growing, despite research suggesting these could accumulate in the body and cause damage.

It pinpointed nanosilver in packaging boxes and nanomaterials in fresh produce bags as key examples of products appearing on the market.

Associate Professor Paul Wright, head of the Nanosafety Research Group at RMIT University, said "nano-packaging" was already proving to be useful overseas.

"Nanomaterials are painted as all bad, but they're not. They have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Such a small proportion of nanomaterials are ones that we're actually watching carefully and regulating," the nano-toxicologist said.

"They've been likened to asbestos, but not all forms of asbestos cause asbestosis."

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