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PRESS RELEASE

www.consumersfiji.org

Council calls for harsher penalties for repeat offenders of food safety laws

The Consumer Council of Fiji wants harsher penalties for traders who ignore fair trading and food safety laws particularly those traders who are repeat offenders. This is after Council's regular market surveillance has revealed that selling of expired, substandard, dented and damaged food products is still very rife and some retail outlets are habitual offenders.

These traders who sell expired or bad food products are profiting and putting consumer's health and safety at risk. What concerns the Council is that despite the Food Safety Law 2003 and Food Safety Regulations 2009 in place and constant calls from the authorities for compliance, some traders continue to sell food items which are either unsafe for human consumption or stored under unhygienic conditions.

From January to April 2010, the Council has received 44 complaints on groceries which comprises of expired/ damaged or bad products. Consumers complaint being sold expired products, bags of flour and rice infested with worms, insects and weevils, foul and smelly meat, liquid milk with lumps and underweight products.

In addition to this Council's regular market surveillance has also found supermarket shelves and freezers stocked with expired and damaged food products, food products with imprinted expired dates torn out and/or new dates pasted over them, dented and damaged canned products, rotten vegetables and fruits and foul and smelly meat.

Most disturbing is the fact that many of these items are sold at ridiculously cheap prices to lure consumers into buying these products thinking that they were getting a **"very good deal or bargain"**. The Council has continuously been writing to these consumers warning them to refrain from such unfair and illegal practices but to no avail. We have also highlighted these cases to the Ministry of Health's Food Unit.

While the Council appreciates the good effort made by the food inspectors to curb unfair trade practices and protecting consumers from health risk and dangers through their vigilant and proactive actions to get such sub-standard food products off the shelves, we believe that a very good deterrent for such practices would be harsher penalties.

Fiji's food safety laws and regulations have clearly defined standards on the quality of food items that must be sold and it prohibits the sale of damaged/ expired and foul food products. If traders continue to breach the laws, they are liable to fines and penalties.

Meanwhile the Council would also like to urge consumers to make better choices for themselves to ensure their own safety; consumers are advised to check the expiry and food labels on products they purchase. Consumers who have inadvertently purchased expired or improperly labelled food products should quickly inform the retailer concerned. This will help prevent the

sale of such products to other buyers. They are also advised to report offending retailers to the Central Board of Health and the Department of Fair Trading and Consumers Affairs should they come across the sale of expired food products or improper food labelling problems. Further consumers have a choice as to the purchase of goods close to the expiry date but they needed to be formed that they should use the [products before the use-by date.

The Council would like to inform those habitual offenders that the Council' mystery shoppers are always in the market watching them and would soon name and shame those supermarkets found in breach of food safety laws. Ignorance is not a defence.

Narendra Padarath
Chairman