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National

Inghams warned over GM claims

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The Commerce Commission has warned poultry producer Inghams Enterprises over its claims its chickens contained no genetically modified (GM) ingredients.

The commission has completed investigating allegations that Ingham's GM-free advertising claims, made in consumer and trade magazines and on television between January 2008 and June 2009, were false or misleading under the Fair Trading Act.

In the advertising, Waikato-based Inghams stated that its chicken products contained "No... GM ingredients" and "have no added hormones, GM ingredients or artificial colours" when the chickens had been fed 13 per cent GM soya feed.

Inghams stopped the advertising once the commission began investigating.

The commission engaged Jack Heinemann, professor of genetics and molecular biology at Canterbury University, to investigate whether animals exposed to feed containing genetically modified material did in fact contain "no GM ingredients".

Prof Heinemann said he was reasonably certain that GM plant material could transfer to animals exposed to GM feed in their diets or environment, and that there can be a residual difference in animals or animal-products as a result of exposure to GM feed.

In a brief statement, Ingham's group executive general manager in New Zealand Mike Rozen said the company accepted the decision and had amended its advertising campaign immediately it became aware of the commission's concerns.

The company would not comment further.

However, on its website, Inghams said the use of GM soy did not compromise an absolute GM-free status and animals that ate feed with a GM component were no different to animals that may have been fed a low GM or GM-free diet.

This position was verified by numerous feeding studies, the website said.

It cited publications by a New Zealand Royal Commission, the Royal Society and the Federation of Animal Science Societies.

However, the commission warned that to consumers, perception was everything.

"Someone buying a chicken that is promoted as containing no GM ingredients would not expect that the chickens had been fed on 13 per cent GM soya feed," said director of fair trading Adrian Sparrow.

"Many consumers wish to avoid food products that contain GM ingredients and this is why food manufacturers like to position themselves as GM free. However consumers ought to be able to rely on the statements made in advertising."

The commission said it would continue to monitor Inghams' representations.

Companies found guilty of breaching provisions of the Fair Trading Act may be fined up to \$200,000.

– NZPA

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