

Insect farmers are hoping to tempt your taste buds with crickets

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

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Bug in your salad? No problem.

At least, that's what the members of the North American Edible Insect Coalition, and millions of other bug-eaters, think. But before Americans start regularly chowing down on cricket tacos and mealworm-flour-filled cookies, there are many hurdles the insect industry will first need to clear.

As the newly formed North American Edible Insect Coalition gathered for its first meeting in May, many people thought that it was headed to Washington. Right now, insects are not specifically listed on the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) registry of foods recognized as safe to eat. Several news outlets reported that the group might begin lobbying, or petitioning, the FDA to put insects on the menu.

Robert Nathan is the president of a not-for-profit group called Little Herds that promotes eating insects. He and his fellow entomophages, or people who like to eat bugs, first thought they would need to get crickets and other bugs added to the FDA's "generally recognized as safe" list. The label tells consumers that the agency considers something safe to eat.

FDA Is OK With Crickets

But crickets aren't a new, untested ingredient; as far as the government is concerned, they are just a food. "The FDA requires that the food must be clean and wholesome – free from filth, pathogens, toxins," said Megan McSeveney, an FDA spokeswoman. Food must also be produced, packaged, stored and transported under sanitary conditions.

Many Americans are uneasy about dining on insects. That's not the case in the rest of the world. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations estimates that some 2 billion people regularly eat bugs. Among the world's most commonly eaten bugs are beetles, caterpillars, bees, wasps and ants, as well as grasshoppers, locusts and crickets.

"I initially got interested in eating bugs when I went to Thailand in 2006," said Kevin Bachhuber, founder of Big Cricket Farms. "I was like, 'This is really delicious.'"

Insects Are Easier On The Environment Than Livestock

Bachhuber and other entomophagy fans see plenty of reasons to talk Americans into loving bugs. Insects take up much less space than most livestock. They pack a powerful protein-filled punch into a small, low-calorie package. It takes just a single gallon of water to raise a pound of

cricket protein, compared with 500 gallons for a pound of chicken and 2,000 gallons for a pound of beef.

In theory, if the Western world shifted at least some of its meat needs to insects, we could shrink the land area of our farms. It would also reduce the environmental footprint.

Jonas House studies human geography at a university in England. He studied insect-based products in the Netherlands and found that convincing people to try bugs once is not enough to win them over forever. Instead, he said, people will ask: "Does it fit into my diet? Can I find it in shops? Can I afford it? And does it taste nice?"

Figuring Out The Logistics Of Farming Insects

A small group of bug-loving citizens such as Bachhuber has seized the opportunity. They're now marketing products such as protein bars full of cricket flour. Some of these snacks have made it to shelves of national grocery stores such as Whole Foods Market.

Some food companies still worry that the ickiness issue will keep consumers from paying for cricket flour and mealworm butter. But the conversation has changed in recent years. Farmers say that discussions with large companies are no longer about the grossness of eating insects. Rather, the conversations are now about the logistics of farming insects for humans to eat.

Bachhuber now focuses on bringing cricket farms up to human food standards. He makes the process sound pretty simple. Farmers focus on transparency in their production, creating policies on cleanliness and bacterial testing. They retool their farms to produce frozen insects, which are better for grinding into cricket flour.

Millions Of Bugs Needed

U.S. bug enthusiasts say there is only one thing standing between us and the food of the future: We need more bugs. Millions and millions more bugs.

Entomo is an insect farm that has been farming crickets for human consumption since 2014. It holds more than 100 million crickets. It takes about six weeks for the crickets to go from hatchling to shipment. But even 900 million crickets a year could barely meet the needs of one major buyer.

Just because crickets can fit into small spaces, it doesn't mean farming them can't be tricky. Equipment can break. A wave of illness can knock out a farm's supply for weeks. Crickets can escape. "No one wants to be shipping millions of live crickets and have a semi-truck turn over," Bachhuber jokes.

It might be years before fried crickets are available at the local grocery store. Still, the insect industry is buzzing with efforts to get them there.