FDA not thrilled with surge in caffeinated foods

By Brady Dennis, Washington Post

Who needs coffee for breakfast when you can pour Wired Wyatt's caffeinated maple syrup over your Wired Waffles? Remember Cracker Jack? This year saw the advent of Cracker Jack'd Power Bites, with as much caffeine per serving as a cup of coffee.

Americans, it turns out, are willing to gobble up caffeine in all kinds of foods – from potato chips to sunflower seeds to beef jerky. Not to mention gummy bears and marshmallows. - Energy-boosting foods racked up more than $1.6 billion in domestic retail sales last year, up nearly 50 percent from five years ago, according to the market research firm Euromonitor International.

The trend, experts say, reflects a rush by food manufacturers to cater to consumers' increasingly frenetic lives – and to cash in on the popularity and profitability of high-caffeine energy drinks.

"This is something that's going to continue to grow," said Roger Sullivan, founder of Wired Waffles, based in Marysville, Wash. He says his product is popular with endurance runners, long-haul truck drivers and sleep-deprived college students. "It's definitely a market where I think a lot of large companies are figuring out how to jump in."

But the growing interest of big food companies might mean the party is over, at least for now.

The Food and Drug Administration threw a wet blanket on the caffeine-laced food craze recently when it asked foodmakers to take a timeout. Concerned about the potential health effects on children, as well as Americans' cumulative caffeine intake,

officials said they want to investigate whether new rules are needed to govern caffeine in foods.

“It’s a trend that raises real concerns,” Michael Taylor, the FDA’s top food safety official, said in an interview. “We’re not here to say that these products are inherently unsafe. We’re trying to understand, what are the right questions to be asking? … We have to figure out, what are the right ways to approach this?”

The agency, which has watched the proliferation of caffeinated foods with increasing alarm, took action after Wrigley launched a caffeinated gum, Alert Energy, in late April with full-page newspaper ads, a promotion at 7-Eleven stores and a NASCAR car plastered with the gum’s logo. Each stick contains the caffeine of half a cup of coffee.

“When you start putting [caffeine] in these different products and forms, do we really understand the effects?” Taylor said, describing the concerns he and others shared with Wrigley executives who met with FDA officials shortly after the rollout of Alert Energy gum. “Isn’t it time to pause and exercise some restraint?”

The company, which declined an interview request, quickly pulled its new gum from the market. While noting that it had put the caffeine content on the label and marketed Alert Energy only to people over 25, Wrigley said in a statement that it was halting production “out of respect for the FDA” while the agency developed “a new regulatory framework” for caffeinated food and drinks.

Taylor said FDA officials have long been aware of smaller manufacturers making niche caffeinated food. He said the agency became concerned when food giants such as PepsiCo — which owns Frito-Lay, the maker of Cracker Jack’d — and other companies began dipping their toes into the caffeinated food market.