



Alcohol labelling

Nutrition declaration and ingredient list – a brief summary of the upcoming self-regulatory approach

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Under the current labelling rules, alcoholic beverages above 1.2% abv can be marketed without information about their ingredients and nutritional composition. As a result, consumers have no way of making an informed purchase in the same way they can with other food products. In this white paper, Joanna Brzezinski discusses the possible changes to the labelling of alcoholic drinks, introduced in a self-regulatory proposal published by the European alcoholic beverages sector earlier this year.

Information about the food they are buying is essential for consumers to enable them to make informed choices. The ingredients list and the nutrition declaration are legally required on the labels of virtually all foodstuffs, with the exception of single ingredient products and alcoholic beverages that contain more than 1.2% of alcohol by volume.

Producers and distributors of alcoholic beverages – which can be very complex in composition – are not currently required to provide information about the nutritional composition or ingredients. The only exception is for allergens, which have to be listed even if the ingredients declaration itself can be omitted. As a result, consumers have no means of making an informed choice between two similar beverages based on their ingredients or nutritional value in the same way they can with other food products.

Council Directive 79/112/EEC, the first general labelling legislation, laid the foundation for declaring ingredients in alcoholic beverages. Yet, 39 years later, the rules have still not been finalised.

The increasing demand for well-defined information about ingredients and nutrition, particularly the latter in terms of energy value, has led to the Directive being revisited.

In March 2017 the European Commission, instigated by the European Parliament, published a report on the position of producers, retailers, public authorities, non-governmental and consumer organisations on mandatory ingredient and nutrition labelling of alcoholic beverages. In response to the findings, the industry was invited to develop a self-regulatory proposal for the entire alcoholic beverages sector within the year.

As a result, in March this year, the European spirit, wine, beer and cider producers presented a joint proposal to the Commission, expressing a voluntary commitment to provide the nutrition and ingredients information on all alcoholic drinks. It also outlined the details of the intended approach to the labelling delivery and presentation.

The joint proposal reveals a willingness to explore innovative approaches that would allow

consumers to access information through new technologies and “consult detailed, tailored and up-to-date information that meets their needs in the best possible way”. It has been proposed that in addition to traditional food product labels, the information could also be provided “off label”, such as via web-links, QR codes, bar codes and other means using smart technology.

The new method of delivering information is expected to provide a more adaptable tool with greater flexibility for handling information, which could be particularly beneficial to small businesses.

Additionally, the Spirits sector is keen to use new/smart technology to provide information about raw materials and production processes, which would go beyond the requirements laid down in Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011. Similarly, the European Cider and Fruit Wine Association (AICV) is considering offering consumers insight into cider and fruit wine production, “*from tree to the distribution centre*”, via either the Association’s or individual companies’ websites.

In reality, the declaration of ingredients is not a straightforward task for all sectors. For example, the wine and aromatised wine sector highlights a potential issue around defining the differences between additives and processing aids in a way that is acceptable to the sector. The complexity of the wine-making process also raises questions about what constitutes an ingredient.

On the subject of nutrition declaration, the only area that the industry is generally in agreement with is about providing the energy value, although there are discussions on whether full

nutritional information should also be available. In some cases this will be possibly be off-label.

In addition, the industry is eager to explore the opportunity presented in Article 34.4 of Regulation 1169/2011, which is to declare the energy value and nutrition information in other than tabular format. There is a particular interest in the use of recognisable symbols such as “E” for energy.

Regarding the expression of nutrition values, a declaration per 100mL (required by Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011) has been agreed by most of the industry. However, the Spirits sector strongly believes that it will mislead consumers. This has been reinforced by the argument that such a declaration may contradict the current method of conveying the sector’s messages about responsible drinking. As a result, the Spirits sector intends to provide the nutrition information based on serving size which, in their view, is the most meaningful to consumers. They have also proposed providing information per 100mL, but this won’t be prominently displayed on the label.

It is reasonable to conclude that a new approach to alcohol labelling may prove challenging for some businesses. However, the industry is working on tools to help businesses with the new challenges. For example, to support small brewing companies, The Brewers of Europe is developing a toolkit for calculating nutritional values.

At the same time, the Spirits sector is planning to create a template list of ingredients for “spirit drinks” and each category defined in Regulation (EU) No. 110/2008, for producers to apply to their own brands.

Reviewing the existing industry guidelines, working on the new implementation, as well as developing ways to efficiently communicate with consumers, are also on the agenda.

Within the next three years, each sector will coordinate the proposed implementation and communicate it to their members as well as local companies.

Finally, under the umbrella of a nominated Steering Group, which will be responsible for monitoring and evaluating the initiative, the alcohol industry intends to publish a report in March 2021, on quantitative and qualitative metrics. The recent proposals for self-regulated provision of nutrition information and ingredient

listing bring the prospect of long-awaited information labelling for alcoholic beverages much closer.

Although the changes are not expected to be introduced immediately, this move is likely to be welcomed not only by consumers, but also by the many health associations who have voiced concerns about excessive alcohol consumption, especially by young people.

Overall, this may prove to be a challenging period for the alcoholic beverages industry, which is not accustomed to some of the labelling practices already accepted and widely applied by other food sectors.

How Leatherhead can help

Leatherhead's global regulatory team covers all major international markets, with over 20 advisors on hand to help with any questions relating to proposals and their long term impact. We can also provide labelling legislation training, and give advice on additives, flavourings and ingredients, as well as carry out compliance label and formulation checks.

About the author

Joanna Brzezinski is Regulatory Analyst at Leatherhead Food Research, holds an MSc in food science from the University of Reading and an MSc in Animal Husbandry and Protection of the Environment from the University of Technology and Agriculture in Poland. She has broad experience in food subjects ranging from microbiology to food innovation and human nutrition. Joanna has over four years' experience in food legislation, and provides regulatory advice and training in UK, Polish and EU food law to Leatherhead's members, covering a wide spectrum of food law related subjects.

About Leatherhead Food Research

Leatherhead Food Research provides expertise and support to the global food and drinks sector with practical solutions that cover all stages of a product's life cycle from consumer insight, ingredient innovation and sensory testing to food safety consultancy and global regulatory advice. Leatherhead operates a membership programme which represents a who's who of the global food and drinks industry. Supporting all members and clients, large or small, Leatherhead provides consultancy and advice, as well as training, market news, published reports and bespoke projects. Alongside member support and project work, our world-renowned experts deliver cutting-edge research in areas that drive long-term commercial benefit for the food and drinks industry. Leatherhead Food Research is a trading name of Leatherhead Research Ltd, a Science Group (AIM:SAG) company.

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