

## Current file on alcohol labelling is only tinkering around the edges

Written by Lynn Boylan on 16 May 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

Self-regulation has failed and it's time for real legislative reform on alcohol labelling, says Lynn Boylan.



Lynn Boylan | *Photo credit: Natalie Hill*

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The European Commission has recently embarked on updating the regulation relating to spirit drinks, its labelling and geographical indications.

The rationale behind this legislative update is to align it with the treaty of the functioning of the EU and to harmonise the geographical indicator procedure with the quality schemes applied to other agricultural products.

While this is all worthy of consideration it would serve the Commission better to pursue reforming the more substantive issues around alcohol labelling. The exemption of ingredients and nutritional information for products containing alcohol of 1.2 per cent or more is untenable.

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In September 2011, 53 countries including EU member states, endorsed the World Health Organisation's European action plan to reduce the harmful use of alcohol 2012–2020. This included a call for alcohol products to be subject to the same kinds of labelling as other food products.

In 2015, the European Parliament called for the mandatory labelling of calorific content on alcoholic beverages. Finally on 13 March 2017, the Commission produced its own report which stated that "it has not identified objective grounds that would justify the absence of information on ingredients and nutrition information on alcoholic beverages."

However, rather than begin the process of legislating or at the very minimum carry out an impact assessment, it has instead called on the industry to bring forward, within one year, a self-regulatory proposal aimed at providing information on ingredients and nutrition of all alcoholic beverages.

This is the same industry that has had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the concept that consumers have the same right to know what is in their alcoholic beverage as they do with every other food and drink product.

Studies in the UK have shown that up to 10 per cent of an adult's daily calorie intake can be made up from alcohol. We have a growing obesity problem in the EU and yet few consumers know that half a litre of beer can contain as many calories as a bar of chocolate. Alcopops - which are particularly popular among young adults - can contain as much as 21 grams of sugar.

Mandatory nutritional labelling is not a silver bullet to reducing alcohol consumption in the EU, but it is part of the tool kit if we are serious about tackling excessive alcohol consumption.

It is estimated that alcohol abuse costs the EU approximately €150bn annually and is the third leading cause of premature death and disease.

The problem is getting worse, not better. The alcohol industry had an opportunity to step up to the plate when it came to self-regulation in its approach to alcohol advertising.

In January of this year, a report published in the scientific journal *Addiction* outlined the failure of the alcohol industry's self-regulation. It said that, "Taken together, the findings suggest that the current self-regulatory systems that govern alcohol marketing practices are not meeting their intended goal of protecting vulnerable populations."

It also noted that many companies do not comply with their own voluntary codes. Leaked emails from 2016 also showed how industry has used self-regulation as a way to deflect public calls for regulation and has instead exploited its willingness to engage in 'voluntary pledges' as PR exercises.

Why are we entrusting the manufacturers of harmful products to decide on what information about that product should be made available to the consumer? The industry suggests off-label information for alcohol. Seriously? Do they honestly believe that consumers have the time to look up online the ingredients on each bottle of alcohol they want to buy?

Self-regulation has failed and the Commission should not delay the inevitable. The only way that the EU will get the sufficient labelling of alcohol products that is in the interests of consumers is to legislate for it.

Of course, we need education and awareness programmes around alcohol abuse. Of course, we need a change in habits towards our alcohol consumption, but if we think that the industry is going to self-regulate against its own best interests in changing consumer behaviour we are fooling ourselves.

The Commission should stop with the foot dragging. We cannot afford to wait a year for the industry to come forward with a proposal that we know will fail to meet the mark. The patchy efforts of the various drinks industries show that there is a grudging acceptance that alcohol labelling must conform to other food labels.

The current file on spirit labelling is only tinkering around the edges. Those of us who are really interested in alcohol labelling that serves the public health interests will not stop pushing for real legislative reform.

## About the author

Lynn Boylan (IE) is Parliament's GUE/NGL group shadow rapporteur on spirit drinks: definition, presentation and labelling

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