

EU Commission report on alcohol labelling is yet another delaying tactic

Written by Renate Sommer on 16 May 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

By asking the alcohol industry to come up with ways to regulate itself, the Commission is making things very easy for itself - but not for innovative micro-enterprises, writes Renate Sommer.



Renate Sommer | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

The nutrition and ingredients labelling of alcoholic beverages was one of the key issues during the negotiations on the regulation on food information to consumers.

The Commission and Council wanted to exempt all alcoholic beverages except alcopops, which are not defined. No agreement could be reached as to whether only mixtures of spirits with soft drinks should be considered as alcopops, or any mixtures of alcohol with non-alcoholic beverages.

Parliament's negotiators simply could not understand why such a niche product should bear complete labelling, while the rules would not apply to any other alcoholic beverage. What about consumer information?

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The second conflict was linked to nutrition labelling. The labelling per 100ml as foreseen for non-alcoholic beverages might work for beer and wine, but could be misleading for spirits. Furthermore, it makes no sense to label the non-existing salt and fat content on alcoholic beverages. The negotiations stalled.

In order to cut this Gordian knot, we eventually agreed to exempt alcoholic beverages from nutrition and ingredients labelling, and asked the Commission to present a report on possible labelling approaches, as well as a definition of 'alcopops', three years after the regulation came into force. This report was published more than two years too late. And I was stunned.

The Commission has made things very easy for itself, by declaring that a definition for alcopops is unnecessary and demanding the alcohol sector to come up with a harmonised self-regulatory labelling approach in one year's time.

In general, I strongly support self-regulatory approaches. Sectorial campaigns such as 'Don't drink and Drive', 'Drinking in Moderation' and the 'Beer Pledge' show that alcohol producers have already come a long way with self-regulation. However, the Commission report is too short-sighted and trivial. The alcohol sector is multifaceted and it could be very difficult to find a common approach in just one year.

Furthermore, has the Commission forgotten about the many SMEs? Micro-enterprises, especially, might not be organised in associations, and might not even have heard about the Commission's report. Should they be excluded from work being done on a self-regulatory approach?

Regarding the nutritional value, which nutrients should be covered? Or would it be sufficient to label merely the energy content? Would it be enough to label average nutritional values for the different sorts of beers, wines and spirits?

It is clear that laboratory analyses are costly, as is printing new labels over and over again. This would be a competitive disadvantage for micro enterprises, which in recent years have been flourishing and innovating - craft breweries, for example.

Is innovation unimportant? Or would off-label information be sufficient? And what about the spirits' "100ml problem"? By the way - has anyone thought about intellectual properties regarding some recipes?

After all, the Commission is asking the industry to draft its own 'law' without any guidelines. This is

risky for producers. All their previous efforts will be in vain if the Commission considers the requested proposal to be unsatisfactory. To me, the Commission's report seems to be yet another delaying tactic and the attempt to leave industry holding the baby.

About the author

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