

## **Alcohol labelling should be about what's best for consumers - not industry**

Written by Glenis Willmott on 16 May 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

When it comes to labelling, there is no reason to treat alcohol differently from other drinks, argues Glenis Willmott.



**Glenis Willmott** | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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March saw the publication of the Commission's long-awaited report on the labelling of alcoholic drinks, which are currently exempt from the labelling requirements that apply to all other food and drink under EU law. I'm yet to hear a compelling justification for this exemption and have long campaigned for these rules to be extended to alcohol. As a minimum I'd like to see calories labelled on alcoholic drinks.

Europe is the heaviest drinking region in the world, with alcohol the third biggest cause of preventable

death and disease. Alcohol-related harm costs the EU economy €155.8bn a year. Per gram, alcohol is second only to fat in terms of number of calories, with a large glass of wine containing the same number of calories as a slice of cake and a pint of lager the same as a large slice of pizza.

Most people are unaware of just how many calories are in alcohol and with research showing that most adults consume more calories from alcohol than they do from soft drinks. It makes no sense to say that the calories should be labelled in a can of coke but not in a can of beer. Calorie labelling for alcohol would enable consumers to make informed and healthier decisions.

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The Commission's report states plainly what I've been arguing for several years: that there is no reason to treat alcohol differently from other drinks. The report also highlights that there is growing consumer demand for more information, with almost 50 per cent saying they would like to see calories labelled on alcohol.

Nevertheless, the report concludes by inviting the alcohol industry to draw up a proposal for self-regulation within the next year. The Commission will review this proposal and may consider other options, including regulation, if it isn't good enough.

I'm concerned that the Commission's conclusion is just kicking this issue into the long grass; we've already waited over two years for this report and now we may have to wait even longer before we see alcohol finally subject to the same rules as other food and drink.

In the absence of EU regulation, there is also a risk that member states will introduce their own, leading to a patchwork of legislation that will only fragment the single market. Indeed the report highlights that several member states have already introduced additional labelling requirements.

I'm not optimistic about the industry's ability to self-regulate. To their credit, the Brewers of Europe launched a pledge in 2015, committing to provide nutrition information on beers.

However, while some spirits producers have provided full information on-label, the sector as a whole prefers the idea of providing calorie information online and would like to give calories per measure, rather than per 100ml which is more comparable.

The wine sector is also only willing to provide information online on a common website. This has to be about what's best for consumers and that shouldn't mean putting the burden on the consumer to go online to find out how many calories are in their drink.

We'll have to wait to see what the industry comes up with over the next year but I hope that they will take this opportunity to put consumers first and provide information to help them make informed and healthier decisions.

## About the author

Glenis Willmott (S&D, UK) is a member of Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

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[Health](#) [6]

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- [3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/opinion/current-file-alcohol-labelling-only-tinkering-around-edges>
- [4] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/opinion/consumers-have-right-know-what-they-drink>
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- [7] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/health-and-social-care>
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