



The Consumer Voice in Europe

UK voluntary nutrition labelling scheme

Letter sent to the Permanent Representations to the EU and all European Commissioners on 7 February 2014 (Ref. L2014_049/MGO/IPA/cm)

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Brussels, 7 February 2014

Re: UK voluntary nutrition labelling scheme

Dear Attaché,

In view of the debate on the UK colour coded nutrition labelling system that is going to take place during the Competitiveness Council on 20-21 February, BEUC, the European consumer organisation, would like to reiterate its strong support for the UK voluntary "Traffic Lights" scheme for processed food products.

In our view, the system which was launched in June 2012 fully complies with the Food Information Regulation's provisions on additional forms of expression and presentation of the nutrition declaration.

BEUC has long supported the use of colour coding using red, orange and green colours to interpret the levels of key nutrients in food products. The scheme provides consumers with at-a-glance information on how much fat, saturates, sugar and salt is in their food in order to facilitate them to make better informed food choices and compose a healthy diet. Research from BEUC members in France, Netherlands, UK, Greece, Italy and independent research conducted in the UK by the FSA and retailers themselves have consistently shown that consumers favour front-of-pack nutrition labelling that includes an interpretative element (colour-coding) for at-a-glance information as it is easy to read, use and understand. A traffic light labelling scheme can facilitate comparison among several products from the same food category both in supermarkets and also online in the context of innovative solutions to help consumers make informed and healthier choices such as the web comparison tool for children's snacks promoted by our Italian member Altroconsumo.

We are aware that the voluntary nature of the UK scheme has been questioned by some Member States. It has also been argued that it is discriminatory to certain foods or categories of foods. However, we would like to point out that the UK FSA guidance - which was simply developed in order to ensure that the scheme, if used, is applied in a consistent way in order not to mislead consumers - makes it clear that the scheme should be used by manufacturers and retailers "where the information is meaningful for consumers" (e.g. in particular pre-prepared convenience foods, ready meals, etc.). As for the nature of the scheme, we can only regret that it is not compulsory although we certainly welcome its large voluntary uptake by many retailers and food companies and we hope that more companies will sign up to using it over time.

While we are pleased with progress in the UK on this, we do regret that it is still difficult for consumers in other Member States to make more informed and, ultimately, healthier choices. We therefore call on those retailers and food businesses who have signed up to the UK system to roll it out in other Member States where they operate. National authorities also have a key role to play in encouraging and facilitating this move and therefore we hope that they can see from the UK experience that, far from misleading consumers, colour coding can and does actually help them make healthier food choices and ultimately contributes to reduce the burden of obesity and diet-related diseases on national health care systems and EU economies.

Yours sincerely,

Monique Goyens
Director General