

Alcohol labelling

SUMMARY

In its Europe's Beating Cancer plan, published in February 2021, the European Commission suggests – among other initiatives concerning cancer prevention – several actions concerning alcoholic beverages, such as limiting online advertising and promotion, and reviewing European Union (EU) legislation on the taxation of alcohol. Also among the proposals is mandatory labelling of ingredients and nutrient content on alcoholic beverages by the end of 2022. Health warnings on labels should follow by the end of 2023.

Labelling of ingredients and nutritional values on alcoholic drinks already has a long history. First attempts to label ingredients were made in the late 1970s, resulting in the Council not being able to agree on any of the proposed models. Alcoholic drinks containing more than 1.2 % by volume of alcohol (ABV) are exempted from the obligation set on other drinks and foodstuffs, to list the ingredients and make a nutritional declaration on the label.

The European Commission adopted a report in 2017, concluding that it had 'not found objective grounds that would justify' the absence of information on ingredients and nutritional information on alcoholic beverages. Following on from the Commission's report, the European associations representing the alcoholic beverages sectors presented their self-regulation proposal in March 2018, suggesting that some sectors would list all ingredients on labels, while others could use online means of communication instead.

Stakeholders have differing views on the desirability and feasibility of such listings on-label; some would prefer this information to be allowed to be given off-label through QR-codes, apps or websites, while others absolutely insist that alcoholic drinks should be no different from other sectors of the food and drink industry. The European Parliament has called on the European Commission to consider a health warning and calorie content on alcoholic beverage labels.



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Introduction

In the [Europe's Beating Cancer plan](#), released on 3 February 2021, the Commission wants to 'cut harmful alcohol consumption' as part of its cancer prevention measures. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) [fact sheet](#), cited in the Commission's cancer plan, Europe continues to have the highest levels of alcohol consumption in the world, resulting in the highest share of all deaths attributable to alcohol consumption. The WHO identifies cancer as the main cause of death due to alcohol in the EU (29 % of alcohol-attributable deaths), followed by liver cirrhosis (20 %), cardiovascular diseases (19 %) and injury (18 %). Alcohol is [known to be a causal factor](#) in over 60 diseases and conditions, including at least seven types of cancer (mouth, upper throat, larynx, oesophagus, breast, liver and colorectal cancers).

With the support of the Beating Cancer plan, and in line with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#), the Commission wants to achieve a relative reduction of at least 10 % in the harmful use of alcohol by 2025. Among the planned actions are reviewing the EU legislation on alcohol taxation and cross-border purchases of alcohol;¹ reducing the marketing of alcoholic drinks to young people; and reviewing EU's promotion policy on alcoholic beverages.

Before the end of 2022, the Commission states, it will come up with a proposal for mandatory labelling of ingredients and nutritional declaration on alcoholic drink labels. Another proposal, on health warnings on labels, would be made before the end of 2023.

The troubled history and EU legislation relating to alcohol labelling

The main EU food labelling legislation, [Regulation \(EU\) No 1169/2011](#) on the provision of food information to consumers (the 'Food Information to Consumers Regulation' or 'FIC Regulation'), requires certain mandatory information to be provided on the labels of prepacked foods and drinks, such as the name of the food; net quantity; and the name and address of the food business operator marketing the food. Among the mandatory information to be given to consumers are also a list of ingredients and a nutritional declaration (energy value and the amount of fat, carbohydrate, sugar, protein and salt).²

When the FIC Regulation was negotiated between the European Parliament and the Council, back in 2010-2011, alcoholic beverages containing more than 1.2 % by volume of alcohol were exempted from the obligation to make a nutritional declaration and a mandatory list of ingredients. For non- or low-alcoholic drinks, this information must be given on the packaging.

The regulation does, however, require that the alcoholic strength by volume (% vol) is announced on the label (Article 9). Mandatory labelling of the most common allergens also applies to alcoholic beverages (such as sulphites, egg and milk products in wine (Article 21)). This provision, however, concerns only the 14 most common allergens, which means that other, less common allergens cannot be found on the label, due to the absence of a list of ingredients. The regulation also states that it is not mandatory to indicate a date of minimum durability in the case of beverages containing more than 10 % alcohol by volume.

Article 41 of the regulation allows Member States to maintain national measures regarding the listing of ingredients of alcoholic beverages while waiting for the adoption of harmonised EU rules. Food business operators may also voluntarily provide this information; the regulation also allows the voluntary nutritional declaration on alcoholic beverages to be limited to the energy value alone.

Some Member States have maintained or adopted national measures imposing additional labelling requirements for certain alcoholic beverages. For example, some Member States require the labelling of the amount of sugar for certain wine products. In France and Lithuania, labels of alcoholic beverages are required to warn consumers about potential health consequences of alcohol during pregnancy, either with a pictogram or with text.

According to the original Commission [proposal](#) for the FIC Regulation, all alcoholic beverages, including 'alcopops' (alcoholic mixed beverages, like a mix of a soft drink with a spirit), were to be covered by the requirement to mandatory list of ingredients and a nutritional declaration, with the exception of beer, wine and spirits. During the negotiations, this exemption was extended to all alcoholic beverages containing more than 1.2 % by volume of alcohol. The Commission was also asked to come up with a definition of an 'alcopop'.

The history of the problematics of ingredients labelling, however, goes back even further. According to a 2017 [Commission report](#) on alcohol labelling, the first EU-level general labelling legislation, a Council Directive dating back to 1979, already provided that in the case of alcoholic drinks, the Council, acting on a proposal from the Commission, shall determine the rules for labelling ingredients. This was to be done before December 1982. The Commission presented proposals in this regard in 1982³ and 1992,⁴ but the Council could not agree on either of them. Nor could requirements for labelling alcoholic drink ingredients be set in subsequent proposals dating from 1997⁵ and 2001.⁶

Article 16(4) of the FIC regulation, however, obliged the Commission to produce a report addressing whether alcoholic beverages should in future be covered by the requirement to provide the information on the energy value, and the reasons justifying possible exemptions, taking into account the need to ensure coherence with other relevant Union policies and considering the need to propose a definition of 'alcopops' in this context.

Other EU legislation with provisions on the labelling of alcoholic beverages exists. [Regulation \(EU\) No 1308/2013](#)⁷ provides technical standards covering oenological practices, manufacturing methods and means of presentation and labelling of wines. The regulation describes the substances likely to be used in the production process and the conditions for their use, via a positive list of oenological practices and treatments. This regulation is now being reviewed as part of the package concerning the future of the common agriculture policy (CAP), and is currently under interinstitutional negotiation ('trilogues') between the European Parliament and the Council (see further details under the following sections of this briefing).

[Regulation \(EU\) No 251/2014](#)⁸ lays down the rules concerning the definition, description, presentation, labelling and the protection of geographical indications of aromatised wines, wine-based drinks and wine-product cocktails (for example *sangria* and *glühwein*).

Recently [revised EU legislation](#) on spirit drinks⁹ defines the categories of spirit drinks (such as rum, gin and liqueurs) and requires that the raw material used to produce the ethyl alcohol is indicated on the label. The regulation also lays down rules on the labelling of the maturation period and on protecting the geographical indications of spirit drinks.

According to [Regulation \(EC\) No 1924/2006](#) on nutrition and health claims made on foods, alcoholic beverages containing more than 1.2 % alcohol by volume must not bear any kind of health claim. Only nutritional claims referring to a low alcohol level, reduced alcohol content, or a reduction in the energy content are permitted.

Examples of other EU actions relevant to alcohol labelling

EU countries have the main responsibility for their national alcohol policy. The Committee on National Alcohol Policy and Action (CNAPA), composed of national delegates, facilitates [cooperation](#) and coordination between EU countries. The [EU Health programme](#) (2014-2020) has funded projects and other initiatives addressing alcohol related harm.

Low-risk drinking guidelines have been introduced by national health bodies in most EU Member States. [A standard drink or a standard unit](#) is a term referring to a specific amount of pure alcohol (ethanol) contained in a drink. There is no international consensus on how much pure alcohol is contained in a standard unit, and there is [considerable variation](#) between European countries in the number of grams of pure alcohol in the nationally defined Standard Drinks (SDs).¹⁰ The lowest

number is found in the United Kingdom where a 'unit' is equivalent to 8 grams (g) of pure alcohol, and the highest in Austria where a Standard Drink is equivalent to 20 g pure alcohol. Among EU Member States, the most frequent value is 10 g of pure ethanol. The majority of respondents taking part in a large [study](#), co-funded by the EU,¹¹ believed that the adoption of an EU agreed standard drink definition would help consumers measure personal alcohol consumption, which would contribute to lower risk consumption.

The European Alcohol and Health Forum, a platform where bodies active at European level could debate, compare approaches and act to tackle alcohol related harm, has been [on hold](#) since 2015, when public health non-governmental organisations left the Forum in protest against the Commission's refusal to submit a new EU alcohol strategy.¹² The Commission states that it is [assessing](#) the relevance and impact of the Forum, and that discussions with stakeholders are continuing through online stakeholder networks on the [EU Health policy platform](#).¹³

The Joint Research Centre, the Commission's knowledge and science service, has created a specific [knowledge gateway](#) on alcoholic beverages, which includes the latest scientific consensus on the health effects of alcohol consumption, and the link between alcohol and cancer.

European Parliament and Council

In the context of adopting the Food Information to Consumers Regulation ([2008/0028\(COD\)](#)), the European Parliament originally supported an exemption for alcoholic beverages but wanted strict labelling for mixed alcoholic drinks or 'alcopops'. Ultimately, the Commission was required to produce a report, within three years of the entry into force of the regulation, concerning the application of the requirements to provide information on ingredients and nutritional information regarding alcoholic beverages. According to the final regulation, the Commission should also consider the need for a definition of beverages such as 'alcopops', which are specifically targeted at young people. It should also, if appropriate, propose specific requirements relating to alcoholic beverages in the context of the FIC Regulation.

In its 2015 [resolution](#) on an EU alcohol strategy, Parliament called on the Commission to assess existing European legislation regarding the need to improve consumer information on alcohol, ensuring that consumers are aware of alcohol and calorie content without imposing barriers in the single market, and stressed the importance of clear, concise and effective information on the effects of alcohol consumption and its health risks. According to the resolution, whereas the FIC Regulation excluded alcoholic beverages from the mandatory provision of the list of ingredients and the nutritional declaration labelling, comprehensive information regarding alcoholic beverages is nevertheless necessary, given the nature of alcohol-related risks.

Parliament called on the Commission to consider adopting an EU-wide label containing a warning to consumers about the dangers of alcoholic drinks during pregnancy and when driving, and requested the Commission to present a legislative proposal requiring calorie content on alcoholic beverage labels by 2016.

Over the years, Members of the European Parliament have also submitted numerous written questions to the Commission on the labelling of alcoholic beverages.

The Council adopted [conclusions](#) on an EU strategy on the reduction of alcohol-related harm in December 2015, underlining that an EU strategy can further support and complement national public health policies, and inviting the Commission to consider the possibility of introducing mandatory labelling of ingredients and nutritional declarations, in particular of the energy value, of alcoholic beverages.

European Commission report

The Commission adopted its [report](#) regarding the mandatory labelling of alcoholic beverages on 13 March 2017 (more than two years after the deadline of December 2014, set in the FIC Regulation).

The report builds on the positions of interested parties before and after the adoption of the FIC Regulation, and on data collected by the Commission through Member States and stakeholder consultations.

In its report, the Commission cites two studies on consumer knowledge, noting that according to the first study,¹⁴ after being informed about the energy content of alcoholic drinks (beer, wine and spirits), almost half (49 %) of the participants wanted information on the energy value of alcoholic beverages to be provided on alcoholic drinks in future.

According to the second study¹⁵ referred to in the Commission's report, consumer knowledge of the nutritional value and ingredients used in alcoholic beverages is limited. In this study (5 400 respondents from 6 Member States), the majority of respondents overestimated the number of calories in beer and wine, while underestimating the amount of calories in whisky. Whereas the main ingredients of beer were fairly well known, the ingredients of wine were not: half of all respondents indicated incorrectly that water was an ingredient of wine and almost two in five respondents were under the false assumption that fruit other than grapes are also an ingredient of wine. Knowledge regarding the main ingredients for types of spirits was lower than that regarding the main ingredients for beer and wine. A majority of those surveyed were of the opinion that the same ingredients and nutritional information should be provided for all food and drink products, regardless if they are alcoholic or non-alcoholic.

According to the Commission, while consumer representatives and public health associations strongly support mandatory ingredient and nutrition labelling of alcoholic beverages, the industry position on the matter has evolved significantly recently. Whereas the Commission says that in the past, food business operators were opposed to any additional labelling requirements, the majority of sectors now acknowledge that consumers have the right to know about the content of their drinks. A number of voluntary initiatives have already been developed by different sectors (see following sections of this briefing for more detailed information). Some Member States also have national measures imposing additional labelling requirements on ingredients for all or certain alcoholic beverages. The report deplores that national rules requesting partial indication of ingredients for certain alcoholic drinks, as well as measures addressing the nutritional declaration for alcoholic beverages, contribute to an increased risk of market fragmentation.

According to the report, in a number of third countries such as the United States, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, and Switzerland, it is mandatory to provide the list of ingredients for certain alcoholic beverages.

The report concludes that, on the basis of the information reviewed, the Commission had 'not identified objective grounds that would justify the absence of information on ingredients and nutrition information on alcoholic beverages or a differentiated treatment for some alcoholic beverages'. The Commission therefore also saw no need or clear added value for a specific definition of 'alcopops' for labelling purposes.

The Commission [invited](#) the alcoholic beverages industry to develop, within a year, a self-regulatory proposal aiming to provide consumers with information about the ingredients and the nutritional value of all alcoholic beverages. The Commission would then assess the industry's proposal and, should it consider it to be unsatisfactory, would launch an impact assessment to review other options.

Industry self-regulatory proposal

Following the Commission's report, the European associations representing the alcoholic beverages sector presented their [self-regulatory proposal](#) in March 2018. Consisting of a joint proposal containing common commitments, it is accompanied by sectoral annexes detailing the modalities for their implementation. In the joint proposal on the provision of nutritional information and ingredient listing, the European alcoholic beverages sector makes the following commitments:

- '1. The European alcoholic beverages sectors are committing to providing the nutrition information and the list of ingredients of their products in tailored and meaningful ways.
2. The nutrition information and the list of ingredients of products will be provided to consumers off-label and/or on label where information provided off-label will be easily accessible from the label itself, either by a web-link, a QR code, a bar code or through other direct means using smart technologies.
3. The sectors will use traditional and/or innovative tools and may develop comprehensive modern information systems to provide useful information to consumers.
4. Food business operators responsible for the food information will decide how to display the information.
5. The information, while abiding to the legal framework laid down in EU or national legislations, will be provided in line with the principles set in this joint proposal and the sectors' annexes.
6. The alcoholic beverages sectors will report on implementation in March 2021. Within the first two years, sectors will report on the progress of their commitments, in accordance with the information provided in the governance section and the sector annexes.'

Spirits sector

In their [annex](#) to the self-regulatory proposal, the spirits sector commits to ensuring that, by the end of 2022, information is available to consumers on the nutrition and ingredients of all spirits sold in the EU. The sector believes that the most meaningful way to provide information on the energy content of spirit drink labels is per serving size. The sector points out that spirit drinks (and beer) are never served in 100 ml portions, and a nutrition declaration per 100 ml (as required in the FIC Regulation) would be misleading and contradictory to guidelines on low-risk and responsible drinking. Therefore, the energy value of spirit drinks should be given in recognisable serving sizes.

The annex further explains that the sector will support its members in their efforts, and that while a growing number of producers is committed to providing calorie information on-label, thousands of small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or micro-enterprises are more likely to use online mechanisms. According to the sector, many spirits producers are already providing the energy value on their website as well as through social media and other platforms, and some of them have committed to extending the content to provide the full nutritional declaration.

Further developments in the spirits sector

Following the industry self-regulatory proposal, and as a result of a 14-month dialogue with the Commission, the representatives of the spirits industry signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) in June 2019, according to which spirits producers will voluntarily start to roll out energy information on-label, combined with comprehensive ingredients and nutritional information online. Calorie information would be provided per 100 ml **and** per serving size. One in four bottles placed on the EU market [would be expected](#) to provide this information by the end of 2020. This share would rise to one in every two bottles (50 %) by the end of 2021 and to two in every three bottles (66 %) by the end of 2022. A cooperation has been started, the industry associations say, with a global supply-chain standardisation body to make information available from bottles via smartphone barcode scans. A common [website](#) also offers information on raw materials, ingredients and assessing calories in alcoholic beverages.

European cider and fruit wine association (AICV)

In their [annex](#) to the self-regulatory proposal, the European cider (apple-based products), perry (pear-based products) and fruit wine producers underline that cider and fruit wine are transformed agricultural products characterised by the process of fermentation, and as such their character can

change from one year to another depending on the characteristics of the crop. Not all ciders and fruit wines can be made with a fixed recipe, as their composition can be adapted in the final stages of the production process, usually by blending or by the use of ingredients or additives (sugars or sweeteners, preservatives) to balance colour, sweetness and flavour, with or without carbonation, plus pasteurisation. The processes, the industry notes, are designed to make a cider/perry or fruit wine with appropriate characteristics suitable for the markets into which they are sold: taking the example of cider, those produced in Sweden have a distinctive flavour profile and character that differs to those made in France, Spain or the United Kingdom.

The AICV encourages its members to provide information for consumers on ingredients and appropriate nutrients either on-label or online. According to the association, it is important that there is an on-label link to the online information. The association also states that it is reviewing its labelling guidelines providing technical information on the appropriate means for calculating the energy value of products, and providing examples of the format for providing the food information for consumers.

Beer sector

The European [brewers' annex](#) to the self-regulatory proposal underlines that European brewers already announced their voluntary [commitment](#) to progressively implement ingredients listing and nutritional information on beers across the EU in March 2015, following the rules laid down in the FIC Regulation.

The industry association, the Brewers of Europe, supports implementation of the commitment through development and dissemination of guidance tools on regulatory requirements and a toolkit on calculation methods for nutritional values.

According to the Brewers of Europe, in 2018, over 70 % of EU beers labelled ingredients, with an estimated 40 % also providing nutrition or energy values predominantly on the label, complemented by digital platforms.

Further developments in the beer sector

In September 2019, the Brewers of Europe and its members signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) and committed to labelling ingredients and energy values on all beer bottles and cans in the EU by 2022.

Wine and aromatised wine products sector

In their [annex](#) to the self-regulatory proposal, the wine and aromatised wine product sector says that they are committed to providing consumers with the relevant information, but that it will be up to the individual to decide how best to convey the information: some operators will provide information on the label; others, often SMEs or micro-enterprises, are more likely to use online mechanisms.

The sector also states that to deliver a coherent approach, they have committed themselves to creating, within three years, a harmonised, comprehensive and modern information ecosystem allowing consumers easy access to nutritional and ingredient information. According to their view, use of off-label tools takes into account the specificities of the wine sector, and would ensure that consumers can obtain the information in their own language, while facilitating the smooth movement of wine products through the single market.

The sector also argues that an increasing number of consumers buy wine online today, and that in view of this emerging trend, development of a harmonised off-label method of communication would be necessary. An EU-wide common communication tool should be developed to offer support to businesses which cannot afford to create their own communication system. This would also be a useful example for companies choosing to set their own system. Support would be needed

for SMEs and micro-enterprises in particular, which, according to the industry, represent more than 90 % of the market. Two out of three bottles of wine produced in Europe, they say, come from grapes cultivated by an SME.

Operators that wish to provide information through off-label communication tools would include a web-link, a QR code, an icon, a symbol or similar means on the label or the packaging, using smart technologies which would give consumers easy and direct access to the information. Nutritional information could be limited to the energy value, and information per portion could be added, although they recognise that serving volumes and consumption guidelines vary across Member States. Energy value could be calculated based on a particular wine, or based on generally established data (average value of a typical wine). An EU-wide database compiling generally established and accepted data for each relevant sub-category of wine should be established.

A table with typical values of energy content per product category is included in the wine sector annex (page 5). The sector also provides information on calories per serving and per category of wine on a [common website](#).

To take the specificities of wine-producing processes into account, the annex proposes a list of principles that should apply when defining the list of ingredients: firstly, wine processing aids¹⁶ should be excluded from the list of ingredients; natural substances used to adjust grape composition¹⁷ should be excluded from the list of ingredients; and substitutable or additional additives that can be used at the last minute before bottling could be mentioned in the list of ingredients on the basis of the substances that the producers are likely to use or use most frequently in the production of a given product. However, the presence of substances causing allergies should be provided as required in the FIC Regulation.

Further developments in the wine sector

Labelling of wine and wine products is part of a package of three files – currently in trilogue negotiation between the European Parliament, Council and the Commission – that together form the proposed [reform of the CAP](#). Labelling belongs under the file concerning the '[common market organisation](#)' (CMO). One of the sectors covered by the proposed CMO regulation is the [EU wine sector](#). Its provisions regulate the definitions of wine, wine production, marketing and labelling, geographical indications and their protection, rights to plant vines, and the vine varieties allowed to be used in wine production. In the European Parliament, the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) is responsible for the [file](#). On 23 October 2020, Parliament voted in plenary on a series of amendments submitted by the political groups to the three committee reports on the CAP proposals.

According to the Parliament's [position](#) concerning wine labelling, the content in the nutritional declaration could be limited to the energy value alone; and the list of ingredients could also be provided by other means than on the label affixed to the bottle (or to any other type of container), provided that a clear and direct link is indicated on the label. Similarly, according to the Council's [general approach](#), confirmed on 19-20 October 2020, the mandatory labelling of wine with a nutritional declaration could be limited to the energy value only, and the producers should have the option of making the list of ingredients available by electronic means. The Commission should be empowered to adopt [delegated acts](#) regarding the presentation and use of the nutritional declaration and of the list of ingredients.

The Portuguese Presidency of the Council has set the goal to obtain agreement on the CAP reform files before the end of June 2021, when it hands the Council presidency over to Slovenia.

Stakeholder views

SpiritsEurope, representing the EU spirit drinks sector, [welcomes](#) the Europe's Beating Cancer plan and supports targeted policy recommendations that are proven to reduce the harmful consumption of alcohol. SpiritsEurope welcomes Commission plans to encourage self- and co-regulatory

initiatives related to marketing, and refers to their memorandum of understanding on consumer information, signed in June 2019, saying that the sector has already delivered on ambitious standards and targets in the area of labelling. For the upcoming debates, SpiritsEurope says, it will be important to consider the relationship between alcohol consumption and health (including physical, mental and social wellbeing) and argues that the best evidence shows that light to moderate consumption can be part of a balanced lifestyle. Therefore, according to the body, harmful alcohol consumption patterns should be targeted: 'It will also be important to promote broader understanding of risk factors for cancer, including genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors'.

The European association of wine companies, Comité Européen des Entreprises Vins ([CEEV](#)), notes that while it is clear that excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages carries an increased cancer risk, according to scientific evidence, drinking wine moderately, specifically as part of a Mediterranean-style diet and in conjunction with the practice of a healthy lifestyle, does not seem to increase the risk of cancer. Concerning the Commission's proposal to develop health warnings for alcoholic drinks, CEEV argues that any work in this field should correctly embrace science and the compatibility of a moderate wine consumption with a healthy lifestyle, and should take into account both the measure's efficiency and the need to preserve the single market. To prevent that the wineries have to print the nutritional information in all 24 EU languages, CEEV is [hoping](#) that the symbol 'E' for energy could be used, followed by the numbers. Also in the name of simplicity, the numbers should be based on average values, as is the case in the food industry, where the calorific values are based on average values. The CEEV has already started developing a digital platform for wine producers, aiming to help with creating e-labels.

The European Confederation of Independent Winegrowers (CEVI) is [concerned](#) about the means to achieve some of the goals in the Beating Cancer plan and calls for closer collaboration with the European stakeholders involved. While CEVI believes that prevention and information are the main drivers to tackle alcohol misuse, it is also convinced that their products can be consumed as part of a healthy lifestyle and enjoyed in a responsible and moderate way. While it says it has been glad to cooperate with the Commission to provide consumers with more information on ingredients and nutritional values, CEVI says it will carefully monitor the next steps to ensure that a coherent and proportionate approach is implemented, avoiding stigmatisation and unnecessary impediments to the marketing of their products.

Brewers of Europe, the association of European breweries, has long [recommended](#) to all breweries to list ingredients and calories on their labels 'in full accordance with the EU law', per 100 ml as required by the FIC Regulation. According to a [report](#) from September 2019, 60 % of beers sold in Europe are calorie labelled in full accordance with EU law, whilst 85 % of beer producers are already labelling ingredients.

The European consumer organisation (BEUC) has strongly advocated ingredient and nutritional labelling for alcoholic beverages for years. According to BEUC, it is [totally unacceptable](#) from the consumer perspective to propose that crucial information is shifted from the label to online platforms. 'The industry is granting itself too much flexibility to decide how much information consumers can see. As consumers make shopping decisions in a matter of seconds, it is unrealistic to expect they will take a few minutes to check online how calorific wine or vodka is,' [BEUC says](#), adding that in most EU countries, more than 3 in 10 consumers do not own a smartphone. Furthermore, on-label information allows consumers to compare between several products on the shelf. Also, according to BEUC, allowing information to be presented online could set a dangerous precedent for other food sectors. 'Digital labelling cannot replace information to consumers but can complement it. For instance, it can help improve legibility for visually impaired consumer or provide more personalised information to consumers', BEUC [underlines](#).

The European Alcohol Policy Alliance, Eurocare, [welcomes](#) the Beating Cancer plan emphasis on alcohol-related harm as a major public health concern. Eurocare welcomes the planned mandatory labelling of ingredients, the nutritional declaration, as well as the inclusion of health warnings on

alcoholic beverage labels. Eurocare expects that in the coming years, the population will better recognise that drinking alcohol is associated with a risk of developing cancer, and that even moderate alcohol intake has been shown to increase the risk of developing breast cancer.

United European Gastroenterology (UEG), as an organisation representing the field of digestive health, also [welcomes](#) the cancer plan and its prevention measures, as digestive cancers are the leading cause of cancer-related death in Europe. Measures aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm, as well as increasing physical activity are important, particularly in the prevention of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, which is a major risk factor for liver cancer, according to UEG.

Italian farmers' organisation Coldiretti [accuses](#) the Commission of attempting to cut funds for the promotion of meat, charcuterie and wine and to put alarmist labels on bottles in the same manner as for cigarette packets. According to Coldiretti, it is completely improper to assimilate the excessive consumption of spirits typical of the Nordic countries to the moderate consumption of quality wine in Italy, arguing that the commitment to protect the health of citizens cannot be translated into simplistic decisions that risk unfairly criminalising individual products regardless of the quantities consumed.

Further considerations

A June 2020 WHO Health Evidence Network (HEN) [synthesis report](#) on alcohol labelling in the European region states that nine EU Member States have some legislation in place on ingredient listing, only one (Ireland) has a requirement for listing the energy value, and four (France, Germany, Ireland and Lithuania) have legislation on health information or warnings on alcohol products (e.g. warnings for pregnant women, on drinking and driving, underage drinking or general warnings on harm to health). Legislation may only be applied to certain drinks or categories in some countries.

Changes to labelling rules for wine are currently under discussion between the European Parliament and the Council in the framework of the interinstitutional process concerning the 2021-2027 CAP and a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products ([2018/0218\(COD\)](#)).

Example of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill in Ireland

According to a recent [WHO synthesis report](#), Ireland is so far the only EU Member State that requires energy value to be listed on alcoholic beverages. Alcohol labelling legislation was introduced in 2018 as part of the [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act](#), mandating the inclusion of both the energy content and health information on labels: a warning informing the public of the danger of alcohol consumption; a warning to inform of the danger of alcohol consumption when pregnant; and a warning intended to inform the public of the direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers.

This was part of a comprehensive alcohol policy package, which also includes obligatory minimum price per gram of alcohol, restricting advertising of alcohol products, and physically separating alcohol products in retail outlets (by a physical barrier through which alcohol products are not visible).

Under EU legislation, Ireland was required to notify this measure according to the [Technical Regulation Information System \(TRIS\) notification procedure](#), intended to prevent the creation of barriers in the single market. Ireland also notified the measure under Article 45 of the FIC Regulation. Ireland first published the bill in December 2015 and notified the EU of the planned measure in January 2016. During this process (TRIS notifications No [2016/42/IRL](#) and [2018/22/IRL](#)), the European Commission, as well as several Member States, issued [comments](#) and detailed opinions, resulting in the bill being [delayed](#). Some of the comments came from large wine-producing countries (also outside Europe), who were concerned about the prospect of cancer warnings on drink labels. The European Commission [questioned](#) the compatibility of some of the technical details of the proposals with European law, although it [clarified](#) that EU law allows Member States to adopt national measures with the aim of protecting consumer health. Following [intense debate](#) on the inclusion of cancer warnings on alcoholic beverage labels, the view in Ireland prevailed that cancer warning labels might stretch the limits of what is necessary to achieve the objectives of public health protection, but – given the existence of evidence – do not go beyond those limits.

After almost three years of debate, the Oireachtas finally [passed](#) the law in October 2018. From July to September 2019, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland held a [public consultation](#) on regulations to be made under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, concerning the details to be used for the health warnings.

Should the Commission pursue its announced aim under the Beating Cancer plan to require changes to labelling of alcoholic beverages, this would mean extensive work for the authorities as well as for industry, including tasks such as deciding on the minimum requirements and harmonising the concept of labels (or e-labels), redesigning and managing the multiple country-specific labels; the list of ingredients would need to be translated into all official EU languages and possibly be adapted on a yearly basis, and there could be special requirements under national law.¹⁸ The exact wording of the health warning would need careful consideration.¹⁹

Even if communicating the list of ingredients online were to be permitted, producers would need to decide whether to develop their own e-labels independently and put the necessary information technology (IT) systems in place, or to communicate the list of ingredients through a common system or platform, in which case the costs of developing the necessary IT system (including a QR-code or bar-code, mobile app) could be shared. Data protection questions would also require to be solved, so that the platform(s) could not collect information about the consumers accessing the e-labels.

In December 2020, the Commission published, for feedback, its [initiative on the revision](#) of broader food labelling rules concerning information provided for consumers (mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling, origin information and rules on date marking). The Commission is planning to adopt these revisions by the end of 2022, but alcohol labelling is not part of this package. A public consultation is also ongoing on a [review of tax rules](#) on alcohol and tobacco bought abroad. It is unclear if a public consultation on alcohol labelling rules will be organised before the Commission publishes its proposal by the end of 2022.

FURTHER READING

[Alcohol labelling – A discussion document on policy options](#), World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe, 2017.

Scholz N., [Europe's Beating Cancer plan – Quick overview and initial reactions](#), EPRS, European Parliament, March 2021.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In 2019, the [price of alcoholic drinks](#) across the EU was more than twice as high in the most expensive Member State than in the cheapest. When price levels in countries are compared with the EU average price level index of 100, the results show that in 2019, the price of alcoholic drinks (spirits, wine and beer) was highest in Finland (with a price level index of 191), followed by Ireland (182) and Sweden (156). The price levels for alcoholic drinks were lowest in Romania (with a price level index of 76), followed by Bulgaria (79) and Hungary (80).

² There are some exceptions to these rules, such as uncut fresh fruit and vegetables (listed article 19 of FIC Regulation) and products consumed in small quantities and/or with no significant nutritional impact, that are exempted from bearing a nutrition declaration (such as herbs and spices, coffee and tea; Annex V of the FIC Regulation).

³ Proposal for a Council directive amending Directive 79/112/EEC on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs for sale to the ultimate consumer, COM(82)626 final.

⁴ Proposal for a Council directive amending Directive 79/112/EEC on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs, COM(91)536 final.

⁵ Proposal for a European Parliament and Council directive amending Directive 79/112/EEC on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs, COM(97)20 final.

- ⁶ Directive 2003/89/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2000/13/EC as regards indication of the ingredients present in foodstuffs.
- ⁷ Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products and repealing Council Regulations (EEC) No 922/72, (EEC) No 234/79, (EC) No 1037/2001 and (EC) No 1234/2007.
- ⁸ Regulation (EU) No 251/2014 on the definition, description, presentation, labelling and the protection of geographical indications of aromatised wine products and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) No 1601/91.
- ⁹ Regulation (EU) 2019/787 on the definition, description, presentation and labelling of spirit drinks, the use of the names of spirit drinks in the presentation and labelling of other foodstuffs, the protection of geographical indications for spirit drinks, the use of ethyl alcohol and distillates of agricultural origin in alcoholic beverages, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 110/2008.
- ¹⁰ See Table 3b, 'Examples of national low-risk drinking recommendations (or drinking guidelines if no low-risk recommendation is in place) and standard units' on the linked JRC website.
- ¹¹ [Good practice principles for low risk drinking guidelines](#), Joint Action on Reducing Alcohol Related Harm (RARHA), 2016.
- ¹² The 2006 EU alcohol strategy officially came to an end in December 2012 and the European Commission has announced that it will not be updated.
- ¹³ The EU Health policy platform is a collaborative initiative to ease communication between European Commission services and health stakeholders.
- ¹⁴ [Study on the Impact of Food Information on Consumers' Decision Making](#), TNS European Behaviour Studies Consortium, 2014.
- ¹⁵ [Consumer insights - knowledge of ingredient and nutrition information off-label information and its use](#), Report GfK Belgium, 2014.
- ¹⁶ The [International Organisation of Vine and Wine](#) (OIV) is said to be finalising the classification of wine oenological substances in order to differentiate wine additives used as processing aids and those used as additives during the wine-making process; consequently, only wine additives that are not considered as processing aids during the process would be included in the list of ingredients.
- ¹⁷ According to the industry proposal, wine is an agricultural product that changes from year to year; wine composition changes as it ages, the product evolves in the bottle; and wine is not made according to a set recipe, therefore its final composition cannot be known until shortly before the wine is bottled. Therefore, the industry says, wine legislation envisages the controlled addition of natural substances during the process, when needed, to adjust and rebalance the composition of the product. Such substances include for example substances to adjust the acidity, such as lactic or citric acid; and substances that adjust the natural sugar content, such as must or sugar.
- ¹⁸ For example in Finland, the mandatory information on food and drink packaging has to be given in the two official languages of the country (Finnish and Swedish); in Belgium there are three official languages.
- ¹⁹ For example in the United States, the [mandatory label information](#) reads as follows: 'GOVERNMENT WARNING: (1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems.'

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