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Consumer/Health Groups Urge Treasury Department to Act in 2013 to Require Standardized, Comprehensive Labeling of Alcoholic Beverages

Letter to Treasury Secretary-Designate Jack Lew Cites Recent Federal Trade Commission Order as Setting the Stage for Final Action

Washington, DC; February 19, 2013 – More than thirty years after first urging the federal government to require meaningful labeling on alcoholic beverages, a coalition of consumer advocacy and public interest groups is appealing to incoming Treasury Secretary Jack Lew to make 2013 the year in which the Treasury Department issues final rules that add alcohol content and calorie information to the labels of all alcoholic beverages.

Today, alcoholic beverages are the only major category of consumable products not required to carry label information summarizing the basic characteristics of these products.

In a letter to Secretary-Designate Lew, four leading public interest groups – Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, National Consumers League and Shape Up America! – used a new Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ruling affecting the labeling of flavored malt beverages to press for action from the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) on final rules that will mandate easy-to-read, standardized “Alcohol Facts” labels on all beer, wine and distilled spirits products, similar to the popular “Nutrition Facts” labels now required on foods and non-alcoholic beverages.

Specifically, the four public interest groups urged Secretary-Designate Lew to expedite a final TTB rulemaking that will require the following information on all beer, wine and spirits’ labels: serving size, calories per serving, fluid ounces of alcohol per serving, percent alcohol by volume, the definition of a “standard drink,” number of drinks per container, and the *Dietary Guidelines* recommendation on moderate drinking (a maximum of one standard drink per day for women and two for men).

According to the joint letter, “Anything short of this basic information would leave alcoholic beverages as an enormous blind spot in the American diet and would be a failure of the regulatory process.”

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Documenting the need for comprehensive information, the letter summarizes the findings of consumer research sent to TTB in 2007, which found that eight in ten adult Americans polled (79%) agreed with the statement: “There is no point in having labeling on the containers of alcohol beverages unless labels include all nutrition and ingredient information, including the amount of alcohol in each drink.” Furthermore, when survey participants were told that the TTB was considering requiring mandatory labeling on all beer, wine and distilled spirits products, nine in ten (90%) said they supported this action.

Despite this consensus, the letter states that lack of action by TTB and its predecessor agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), has kept consumers from knowing the most basic information about alcoholic beverages, which is necessary to reduce alcohol abuse, drunk driving, and the many diseases attributable to excessive alcohol intake. This includes the facts needed to follow the *Dietary Guidelines*’ advice that men who choose to drink limit their consumption to two drinks a day and that women restrict their consumption to one drink per day. As stated in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*, the consumption of alcoholic beverages may have beneficial effects for some consumers when consumed in moderation. But alcohol is a significant source of calories (on average 100 calories per day according to a recent report from the CDC) and can increase the risk for obesity, hypertension, fatty liver disease and certain cancers, as well as injury if consumed in excess.

After 30 Years of Government Inaction, FTC Ruling Could Be Game Changer

The joint letter documents a frustrating history on modernizing alcohol labels tracing back to 1972, when consumer organizations first asked the federal government to require meaningful alcohol labeling to ensure consumers have the information to make informed decisions about what and how much to drink. Because BATF and TTB largely ignored the request for action, in 2003, the National Consumers League joined with the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America and 75 other public health and consumer organizations in filing a formal petition. In response, TTB issued an “advanced notice of proposed rulemaking” in April 2005 and received more than 18,000 comments, of which 96 percent supported giving consumers access to standardized and complete labeling information on beer, wine and distilled spirits labels.

TTB’s most recent action occurred in 2007 when the agency proposed a mandatory “Serving Facts” panel on beer, wine and distilled spirits but notably ignored the most important information consumers need when consuming an alcoholic beverage – alcohol content disclosure and the amount of alcohol in a serving. This resulted in another barrage of letters from consumers and public health leaders, all calling for more complete information on the label. Since the close of the public comment period in February 2008, TTB has not moved forward with issuing final regulations.

Now, however, the public interest groups see an opening with the February 13 FTC final order settling charges against Phusion Projects, LLC, the manufacturer of Four Loko flavored malt beverages. FTC’s order, which generated more than 250 comments, requires the company to seek approval from TTB to put an Alcohol Facts panel on its malt beverage products that lists the container size, percentage alcohol by volume, number of servings in the container, and serving size in fluid ounces – all information that FTC calls “truthful and non-misleading.”

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Since TTB's existing rule does not include all this information, nor does it include all the information the public interest groups say consumers want, the joint letter urges Secretary-Designate Lew to make 2013 the year in which alcohol content and calorie and nutrition information is included on the labels of *all* alcoholic beverages.

The letter concludes: "the need to modernize alcohol beverage labels so that consumers can better understand how much alcohol they are consuming, and to comply with the Dietary Guidelines, has been unaddressed for far too long. Better alcohol awareness cannot happen without better labeling."

To view a copy of the letter to Secretary-Designate Lew, go to www.consumerfed.org or www.shapeup.org.

About the Center for Science in the Public Interest

Since 1971, the Center for Science in the Public Interest [www.cspinet.org] has been a strong advocate for nutrition and health, food safety, alcohol policy, and sound science. Founded by executive director Michael Jacobson, Ph.D. and two other scientists, CSPI has long sought to educate the public, advocate government policies that are consistent with scientific evidence on health and environmental issues, and counter industry's powerful influence on public opinion and public policies.

About the Consumer Federation of America

Consumer Federation of America [www.consumerfed.org] is a non-profit association of some 300 organizations, with a combined membership of over 50 million Americans. Since its founding in 1968, CFA has worked to advance the interest of American consumers through research, education and advocacy. CFA's Food Policy Institute was created in 1999 and engages in research, education and advocacy on food and agricultural policy, agricultural biotechnology, food safety and nutrition.

About the National Consumers League

Founded in 1899, the National Consumers League is America's pioneer consumer organization. Its mission is to protect and promote social and economic justice for consumers and workers in the United States and abroad. NCL is a private, nonprofit membership organization. For more information, visit www.nclnet.org.

About Shape Up America!

Shape Up America! was founded in 1994 by former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to raise awareness of the health effects of obesity and to provide responsible information on weight management to the public and to health care professionals. The organization maintains an award winning website – www.shapeup.org – accessed by more than 100,000 visitors each month.

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