



Online Event: How can we unlock the full potential of the food labelling system?



Wednesday 11 May 2022, 11:30 - 12:10 CEST
Online Event

Hosted by MEP Maria Spyraiki

Speakers

- **MEP Maria Spyraiki**, Co-Chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on 'Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development'
- **Giorgos Rossides**, Head of Cabinet for European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, European Commission
- **Iosif Alexandridis**, Nutrition, Health & Wellness Manager, Nestlé Hellas
- **Christina Papanikolaou**, Representative of the Athens Chamber of Small and Medium Industries
- **Bruno Menne**, Senior Policy Advisor, Copa-Cogeca
- **Emma Calvert**, Senior Food Policy Officer, BEUC

Opening Remarks

MEP Maria Spyraiki

“A major challenge lies ahead to prevent chronic diseases; raising awareness via labelling is one important step.”

MEP Maria Spyraiki started by underlining the importance of this event, since it is necessary to support consumers in their food choices. At the same time, a major challenge lies ahead to prevent chronic diseases. **Raising awareness via labelling** is one important step in this process. At this moment, **Nutriscore is the most well-known labelling system** across the European Union (EU). The purpose of using a food label system is to **ensure the recognition of the nutritious value of products**. Moreover, **labels provide consumers with valuable information** on ingredients, nutritious composition and micronutrients. Additionally, it was highlighted that **labels can contribute to ensuring food safety**. On top of that, around 10% of food in the EU is thrown away. **Consumers and supply chain stakeholders must therefore be educated on how to prevent food waste**. To conclude, MEP Spyraiki focused on information received from the European Commission (EC) regarding the way in which Nutriscore works and will be upgraded. In context of the Farm-to-Fork strategy, **the EC will proceed with a proposal for a harmonized mandatory front-of-pack (FOP) label** at the European level, by the end of 2022.

Intervention

Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet for European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, European Commission

“Food labelling can steer consumer behaviour and enable the shift to healthy and sustainable diets.”

Mr. Giorgos Rossides started by highlighting that **food labelling is one of the most important initiatives of Commissioner Kyriakides’ mandate**. *“It is no surprise that the action for the Farm-to-Fork Strategy and Europe’s beating cancer plan are a priority.”* Moving on, the importance of

the context was observed, as 52% of the adult population and one third of all children between the age of 6 and 9 in the EU are either overweight or obese, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). This has **negative consequences for the quality of life**, national health systems, government budgets, and generally for the broader sustainability of our economies. Furthermore, Mr. Rossides stressed the fact that **food labelling can steer consumer behavior and enable a shift to more healthy diets**. Increased demand for labelling can also drive change towards more sustainable production models. With these objectives in mind, **it was reiterated that the EC is preparing a proposal for a harmonized mandatory FOP nutrition label**. The focus was put on the fact that **the proposal will be based on scientific evidence**, while also emphasizing the value of Mediterranean and Nordic diets. To conclude the intervention, **the importance of empowering consumers** through useful information and **the need to work together to find a common solution in the EU** was underlined.

Presentation

Iosif Alexandridis, Nutrition, Health & Wellness Manager, Nestlé Hellas

“Consumer health must be at the heart of any discussion on a harmonized labelling system.”

Mr. Iosif Alexandridis welcomed the announcement for a harmonized and mandatory FOP nutrition label as part of the Farm-to-Fork Strategy. In his presentation, **the key elements of an efficient FOP labelling system were explained**. For the label to be effective, it should **drive innovation and renovation in the food industry**. It also needs to be **transparent, simple and easy** to understand for consumers. In order to accomplish this, **a common reference amount is necessary** that reflects the mandatory ‘nutrition declaration’. The system needs to be backed by strong consumer studies which support the label’s effectiveness in helping consumers to make healthier and informed food choices. Moreover, **the FOP labelling should be based on sound and independent science**. Finally, it needs to be **harmonized across the EU**, ensuring a level playing field. To conclude the presentation, Mr. Alexandridis emphasized that **consumer health must be at the heart of any discussion for a harmonized labelling system**.

Reactions from stakeholders

Christina Papanikolaou, Representative of the Athens Chamber of Small and Medium Industries

“A harmonized front-of-pack labelling system should be based on the real nutritional value of every food product, taking into consideration the nutritional profile and the place that the product has taken in the usual dietary habits of the European population.”

Ms. Christina Papanikolaou first mentioned that **many challenges and opportunities lie ahead in the field of food labelling**. The main matter of contention for the European authorities is changing the existing voluntary labelling system towards a mandatory, pan-European system. Such a system should represent **an opportunity for consumers to make healthier choices**. *“We understand the need of a more simplified and informative labelling system that could successfully overcome the complexity of the existing detailed regulations.”* Furthermore, **a harmonized FOP labelling system must be based on the real nutritional value of every food product**, taking into consideration two parameters: the nutrient profile and the place of the product in the standard dietary habits of the European populations. Ms. Papanikolaou followed this up by explaining that **any food labelling system should be part of a broader nutritional strategy and public health policy**, taking into account general dietary recommendations. However, it was stressed that **the Nutriscore system is not part of such a broader strategy**. Instead, **it is a simplified system that disadvantages more traditional food products** that are key elements of several types of diets, including the Mediterranean one. This could have consequences for market competition, for primary production methods and thus for many small and medium sized food enterprises.

Bruno Menne, Senior Policy Advisor, Copa-Cogeca

“The Nutriscore system is clearly designed for ultra-processed food products and puts traditional products at a competitive disadvantage, because they do not have the opportunity to reformulate.”

Mr. Bruno Menne identified **two main challenges regarding the establishment of a FOP nutritional labelling system**. First, harmonizing will not be straightforward, since many Member States already have a system in place. Second, a system must be used that is able to **provide two essential types of information: the place of the product in the food pyramid; and how does this product compare to other products** from the same food category. *“We need a system that is able to provide this to the consumers in a way that is not confusing; and on this note, we believe that the Nutriscore is really not suited.”* Additionally, **a harmonized EU food labelling system would represent an opportunity for consumers**, giving them access to the same information across all Member States. Producers would benefit too, because **the circulation of food products between Member States would be facilitated**. Mr. Menne continued by **agreeing with Ms. Papanikolaou that the Nutriscore system has been designed in a way that favors highly processed food products**. By focusing only on some key elements such as saturated fats, sugar, salt and fiber, reformulated products, made by large food manufacturing companies, are able to score better. This means that **traditional products are at a competitive disadvantage**.

Emma Calvert, Senior Food Policy Officer, BEUC

“A criteria BEUC thinks is very important are uniform reference amounts so consumers can compare products easily.”

Ms. Emma Calvert first redirected the discussion towards **the added value of FOP nutrition labelling for consumers**. This is being recommended by the WHO to **counter the current food environment, which pushes people to make unhealthy choices**. *“Front-of-pack nutrition labelling can really help inform consumers and guide them towards choosing healthier options.”* Moreover, **a single European scheme was described as a potential solution for the fragmented labelling landscape across Europe**. The results of the recent public consultation showed that a high level of consensus exists for harmonization of national systems, and this is a key point for BEUC. Nevertheless, it was noted that **labelling is not a miracle solution**. Moving on, **Ms. Calvert pointed out the main criteria that a FOP nutrition label should adhere to**. First of all, it should be **easy to understand for consumers**, especially because they make split second decisions when buying food. This is particularly crucial for lower-income demographics, who tend to be most at

risk of becoming overweight while simultaneously possessing the lowest level of nutritional knowledge. On top of that, any good label must be **based on independent scientific evidence**. Other important components are **the use of uniform reference amounts** and **public authorities ensuring its trustworthiness and credibility**. Since the Nutriscore system fulfills all these criteria, BEUC supports it.

Q&A Session

After the reactions by stakeholders, **a few remarks were made by the audience**. **The possible extension of the scope of labelling systems** from supermarkets to restaurants was raised, just like concerns about the type of labelling requirements that would apply to imports. It was also questioned if appropriate institutions exist which are able to properly control a new EU labelling system. Finally, key points regarding **the treatment of traditional Mediterranean food products by labelling systems** made during the discussion were echoed.

Mr. Alexandridis commented that key elements from the traditional Mediterranean diet (like fruits, vegetable, pulses, nuts, olive oil) are already included in the Nutriscore algorithm. It was clarified that **the objective of the Nutriscore system is not to penalize any type of traditional product**; on the contrary, these products need to be protected. **The system is based on sound scientific evidence**, designed to inform consumers. It allows them to compare between products of the same category and make healthier food choices.

Closing Remarks

MEP Maria Spyrali

“The outcome from today’s discussion is that there are many positive elements when it comes to Nutriscore, most notably the relevant information that is provided to consumers; but it is not the only one.”

Starting the closing remarks, **MEP Spyraiki** stated that during this event, **the way in which a European labelling system will be fleshed out was discussed**. The relevant concerns from stakeholders were incorporated, for instance **how the specificities of the Mediterranean and Nordic diets will be included**, which have been judged as being healthy by respectively the UNESCO and the WHO. On top of this, the audience was reminded that **the proposal for FOP nutrition labelling** will be brought forward by the EC at the end of 2022. *“This is a part of the answer of Commissioner Kyriakides when it comes to the issue of labelling.”* **Nutriscore belongs among such solutions, but it is not a pan-European panacea** that will be implemented in the framework of Europe-wide labelling. It was observed that **discussions are only starting right now**, and the EC proposal is awaited to move forward in a more substantial way. After its publication, the initiative will be amended by the European Parliament and by the Council of the EU; **many Member States are already raising their concerns** on the way that the Nutriscore system should be implemented. MEP Spyraiki summarized that **the main outcome from today’s discussion is that many positive elements are present when it comes to Nutriscore**, most notably that relevant information is provided to consumers; **but it is not the only solution that is being considered**.