

Food Ministers – too close to industry

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is disappointed with the outcomes of the Food Ministers' meeting in Melbourne. The majority of the members of the *Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation* have refused to put the health of the community ahead of the interests of big business. The Ministers failed to adopt a simple and straight forward system of traffic light labelling and the strongest messages about the dangers of alcohol use during pregnancy.

Michael Moore, CEO of the PHAA said, "Although the PHAA recognises substantive reforms by the federal government in areas like 'alcopops' and front of pack labelling of tobacco we are uneasy about the more recent trend to prioritise business over community health. We understand economic realities. However, in recent decisions on food labelling, warning labels on alcohol and reforms on medicines they seem to have moved much closer to the industry perspective".

"The acceptance of industry self-regulation is effectively a sop to a softened approach when there are issues that need to be tackled vigorously".

"The effective labelling of food is not just about adults. There is overwhelming evidence that our children are becoming more obese and it is incumbent upon us as a society to take every action possible to deal with the epidemic of poor nutrition and obesity."

"In agreeing to have 'a collaborative process with key industry, public health and consumer stakeholders to develop an agreed system within a year' the Ministers have put a nail in the coffin of the simple, most effective way for people to understanding the quality of their manufactured food".

In its February newsletter the Australian Food and Grocery Council stated: "AFGC categorically opposes and will continue to oppose, traffic light front of pack labelling in any guise".

"With this sort of 'categorical' statement it will be impossible to have the system of traffic light labelling that is favoured by almost all health organisations", said Mr Moore.

"If people are to be able to make real choices about healthy eating they need an easy and simple method to interpret information. The most effective way to achieve this is through a multiple traffic light system on the front of packs", concluded Mr Moore.

For further information/comment:

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Communique of the Ministers follows:

Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation

COMMUNIQUÉ

9 December 2011

Australian and New Zealand ministers responsible for the regulation of food and beverages met in Melbourne today to consider their response to the recommendations in the Food Labelling Review Report, *Labelling Logic*.

Today's meeting, chaired by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, Catherine King, was the first meeting of the Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation (Forum). The Forum on Food Regulation replaces the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council.

In considering the 61 recommendations of the food labelling review to formulate an agreed, all of government response, Forum members acknowledged the challenge faced by the Review Panel as it considered issues which generated considerable debate during the Review.

"Many of the issues have been the subject of deliberation by governments in Australia and New Zealand and internationally for some time now, and it is acknowledged that some issues will continue to be a focus in the future as we strive to improve public health and maintain our food safety, security and sustainability," Ms King said.

"In considering its response to the recommendations, the Forum proposed actions and implementation over the next five years that endeavour to balance improving the information on food labelling to meet consumers' needs, against maintaining marketing flexibility and minimizing the regulatory burden on industry and barriers to trade.

The full response will be available on the Food Regulation website¹[1].

Some of the key initiatives agreed by the Forum on Food Regulation include:

- **National Nutrition Policy:** Ministers agreed to the development of a comprehensive National Nutrition Policy and the development of guidelines that will outline the expectations of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) in relation to the role of food standards in supporting public health objectives;
- **Food Labelling:** Ministers agreed to a framework that will guide decision making on food labelling matters using a three tiered hierarchy consisting of food safety, followed by preventative health and consumer values issues. It was agreed that any new technology would be considered on a case by case basis against this hierarchy.
- **Front of Pack Labelling:** Ministers agreed to the need for an easily understood, interpretive front-of-pack labeling system for packaged foods. The Forum on Food Regulation will lead a collaborative process with key industry, public health and consumer stakeholders to develop an agreed system within a year. Ministers have required officials to provide a substantial report on the development of a front of pack labelling (FoPL) scheme within six months, to be considered at

¹[1] <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/foodsecretariat-database.htm>

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the June meeting of the Forum, with a view to having a system by the end of next year. The aim is to avoid the proliferation of different FoPL systems and the potential for consumer confusion from conflicting or inconsistent nutrition messages.

- **Pregnancy warning labels on alcohol:** Ministers agreed that warnings about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant should be pursued. Industry is to be given the opportunity to introduce appropriate labelling on a voluntary basis for a period of two years before regulating for this change..
- **Health claims:** Ministers considered a presentation by Food Standards Australia New Zealand on its work to develop a new standard for Nutrition, Health and Related Claims to help inform their decision on the Labelling Review recommendation on nutrition and health claims. FSANZ have now been asked to undertake broad consultation on the draft standard before a final standard is presented to Ministers.

Other issues discussed included:

Changed food safety arrangement for the retail and food service sectors

The Forum on Food Regulation has completed a review of the 2003 Ministerial Policy Guideline on Food Safety Management in Australia – Food Safety Programs and has agreed to put in place a new food safety management Policy Guideline for the retail/food service sectors. The new guideline will provide a framework for development of effective, efficient and nationally consistent food safety management arrangements for these sectors. The implementation of the 2003 Policy Guideline as it applies to other food industry sectors has been completed and is not changing.

Review of the mandatory fortification of bread with folic acid

Ministers noted that mandatory fortification in Australia has been successfully implemented by industry. They agreed to a phased approach for the Review that will assess the effectiveness of mandatory fortification. The Review will need to be supported by adequate and comprehensive data to make an informed assessment of the effectiveness of mandatory fortification of bread with folic acid, and funding permitting, the mandatory fortification of bread with iodine. The findings of the data from the nutrition and biomedical components of the Australian Health Survey (the National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey and the National Health Measures Survey), have been identified as necessary to inform the Review, however the full results from this Survey are not expected to be available until May 2013 and onwards into 2014.

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