

EU moves closer to counting calories in alcoholic drinks

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Health conscious tipplers may be closer to finding out just how many calories they are imbibing as consumer advocates push for EU nutritional labelling on alcoholic drinks in the face of strong industry resistance.

The European Parliament took a first step last month when it called on the European Commission to draw up legislation requiring such labelling by 2016.

Adopted by 63 of the 68 members of the parliament's health committee, the resolution also calls for labels that highlight the dangers of alcohol for pregnant women and motorists.

It was sweet revenge for Glenis Willmott, a Labour MEP from Britain who steered the proposal through the committee after a first attempt failed in 2011 with what she said was heavy lobbying from the drinks industry.

This time around, Willmott wants to make sure there is no mistake and that consumers get the information they need.

"Consumers have a right to know that a glass of wine has the same number of [calories](#) as a slice of cake and that drinking while pregnant can harm your baby," she said.

"This isn't about telling people what to do but giving them the

information they need to make informed choices," Willmott added.

Ilaria Passarani, an official with the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) advocacy group, said people need to know alcohol's effect on their diet.

"Most of us know alcohol must be consumed in moderation. However, the scale of alcohol's impact on our weight and health is far less obvious," Passarani said.

"How many people know that an average half litre (around one pint) of five percent alcohol beer contains as many calories as a chocolate bar?" she asked.

'North-south divide'

The committee's non-binding resolution is due to be voted on by the full parliament at the end of April.

In spite of "a north-south divide on the question and the sensitivities of French, Spanish and Italian winegrowers," it might be adopted this time, a parliamentary source said.

The lines are moving.

For Britain and the Scandinavian countries, it is becoming imperative to curb binge drinking among the young, as well as to fight the increase in obesity, which is partly fuelled by alcohol consumption.

The drinks industry is also facing consumers who are increasingly demanding transparency.

Spotting the trend, Carlsberg, Heineken, AB Inbev and SABMiller last

month all backed a plan to voluntarily list the calorie count and other nutritional information of their beers.

The Brewers of Europe, a trade association representing more than 5,000 brewers, said the move will show that beer is not as fattening as some people think when compared to wine and spirits.

The group published a table comparing calories in 100 millilitres of various drinks: 245 calories for whisky, 82 for red wine and 46 for beer containing 4.5 percent or 5.5 percent alcohol—the same as for fresh orange juice.

Commission 'resistance'

Spirit makers cried foul, saying the brewers' move was misleading and also undermined messages about responsible drinking.

"While 100 ml is usually a fraction of the amount of beer a person might consume in one serving, it can equal three servings of spirits: the maximum daily recommendation for men and beyond what is recommended for women," industry group SpiritsEurope said.

When he took up his post last October, EU Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis also called for ending the code of silence on the calorie count of alcohol.

"However, it seems there is resistance from some parts of the Commission to any action on alcohol," Willmott said.

Brussels estimates that alcohol abuse costs the European Union some 155 billion euros (\$164 billion) a year in social and health costs.

Even if people consume less alcohol after the peak in the 1970s,

Europeans remain the biggest drinkers in the world.

The Commission, the EU's executive arm, appears reluctant to get drawn into a fight and has so far failed to deliver a report it had said would be ready in December last year.

"Most of the work still has to be done. The question is sensitive and discussions are still necessary," a Commission official said.

The wine industry has already sharpened its arguments in the name of what it sees as the special character of its product.

"Wine is not the result of a fixed recipe," said the CEEV, the European Committee of Wine Businesses, which represents the EU industry and trade in wines.

"As an agricultural product, wine changes from one year to the next depending on the characteristics of the harvest," it said.

"Imposing nutritional labelling would lead to enormous additional costs for the winegrowing sector, costs with which most wine producers will not cope."

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