

Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation

FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

13 December 2013

The Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation (the Forum) met in Melbourne today and was chaired by the Assistant Minister for Health, Senator the Hon Fiona Nash. Australian and New Zealand Ministers responsible for food regulation considered a range of issues including Front-of-Pack Labelling, progress on pregnancy warnings on alcohol products, and agreed a policy statement to clarify how public health should be interpreted by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ).

Front-of-Pack Labelling (FoPL)

The Forum considered refinements to the Health Star Rating Calculator (which is the algorithm that generates the star rating for food products) to address initial technical issues with respect to dairy.

The Forum endorsed the use of the Health Star Rating Calculator as part of the voluntary Health Star Rating System, noting that a process was required to deal with anomalies.

The Commonwealth Assistant Minister for Health, Senator the Hon Fiona Nash, informed the Forum that she will direct the Department of Health to broaden the cost benefit analysis of the FoPL to include evidence-based research and extensive industry consultations in the absence of a Regulatory Impact Statement which was not agreed to by the Forum. This will be designed to address compliance that was noted by the Office of Best Practice and Regulation as well as the interests of New Zealand. The report will be provided to the Forum in June 2014.

The Forum also agreed on membership and chairing arrangements for the tripartite Front-of-Pack Labelling Oversight and Advisory Committee (Oversight Committee) that will be established in early 2014, with representation from industry, public health and consumers, and government. The Oversight Committee will monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Health Star Rating System over time.

The Forum also agreed that the Oversight Committee develop a process for addressing anomalies in the Health Star Rating System for consideration by the Forum at an out-of-session meeting as soon as possible.

The Forum re-emphasised that the System will give consumers at-a-glance information about the food they are buying through a star rating scale of ½ to 5 stars for packaged food products in Australia. The Forum noted that the Health Star Rating System does not provide guidance about the amount of any food which would be eaten as part of a healthy diet. New Zealand stated that they are actively considering joining the Health Star Rating System and should be able to advise a decision, either way, intersessionally in the coming months. Should New Zealand join the Health Star Rating System it was agreed in the Forum that they would have active membership on the Oversight Committee.

Pregnancy warnings on Alcohol Labels

Food Regulation Ministers noted that a project to evaluate action taken by the alcohol industry in Australia in placing pregnancy warnings on alcohol products will commence shortly. A rigorous methodology, including consideration of economic impacts, and an extensive consultation process will underpin this evaluation. Interim and final reports will be provided to Food Regulation Ministers in March and June 2014 respectively.

New Zealand will also be undertaking a quantitative evaluation of the New Zealand industry's voluntary labelling initiatives. This will be undertaken once the Australian evaluation framework is circulated to the Forum.

Policy statement for public health role of Food Standards Australia New Zealand

The Forum agreed to the policy statement to clarify how public health should be interpreted by FSANZ. This statement was developed as part of the Forum's response to 'Labelling Logic', the report of the independent review of food labelling law and policy.

The policy statement draws on the 'Overarching Strategic Statement for the Food Regulatory System' (Overarching Statement) that provides the strategic context for the Australian and New Zealand food regulation system that was endorsed in May 2008. This document articulates the scope and objectives of the food regulation system and acknowledges food regulation as one facet of a range of strategies that may play an important role in preventing and reducing disease, illness and disability.

Low THC hemp in food

The Forum agreed to further investigation by FSANZ of the potential issues relating to the use of low THC hemp in food products.

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