

European Commission

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament

and of the Council

on the provision of food information to consumers

- COM(2008) 40 final -

Joint Position Paper

of the

European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP)

09 March 2010

About the *European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP)*

The *European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP)* represents over 40 national social security organisations in 15 EU Member States and Switzerland, active in the field of health insurance, pensions, family benefits, occupational safety and accident insurance and unemployment insurance. The aims of ESIP and its members are to preserve high-profile social security for Europe; to reinforce solidarity-based social insurance systems and to maintain European social protection quality. ESIP builds strategic alliances for developing common positions to influence the European decision-making process and is a consultation forum for the European institutions and other multinational bodies active in the field of social security.

Statement regarding positions submitted by ESIP: *ESIP members support this position in so far as the subject matter lies within their field of competence. ESIP's positions are not legally binding on its members.*

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Summary

ESIP calls for mandatory labelling of foods with nutritional information to include the following:

- **The calorific value (Joules and Kilo calories) as well as the weight of nutrients such as fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt, to be clearly readable on the front of the pack.**
- **An easily comprehensible aid to making food choices: the nutritional content information should be combined with a coloured background in the form of a multiple traffic light system on the front of the packaging. Red indicates high, amber medium and green low levels of the respective nutrient. The colour categories should be based on sound, independent scientific criteria.**
- **A detailed nutritional panel indicating the “Big 8” nutrients (energy, protein, carbohydrates, sugars, fibre, fat, saturated fats and salt) on the back of the packaging.**

The European Commission proposal for a Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers (COM(2008) 40 final) published on 30 January 2008 aims to modernise and improve EU food labelling rules, so that consumers have, in a readable and understandable manner, the essential information they need to make informed purchasing choices. The proposal introduces mandatory labelling of key nutritional elements in the principal field of vision of a food label (front of pack). A declaration of energy value, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, with specific reference to sugars, and salts expressed as amounts per 100g or per 100 ml or per portion will become mandatory (GDA¹ – scheme).

ESIP welcomes the fact that, for the first time, mandatory nutritional declarations are proposed in EU legislation. However, ESIP believes that the proposed nutritional declaration in the form of numerical information alone does not sufficiently take into account the differences in perception of consumers and does not meet the consumers' information needs. A consumer-friendly and understandable labelling system should enable the consumer: older people, people who have poor eyesight, people who have difficulties with reading, chronically ill people and overweight people, to make healthy food choices more easily.

This regulation offers the opportunity to help people through simple and understandable nutritional labelling to eat more healthily and to make balanced dietary choices.

Therefore, ESIP calls for a front-pack multiple traffic light colour system based on the use of red, amber and green colour coding to indicate whether the levels of the key nutrients (fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt) are high, medium or low to complement the mandatory numerical values. The colour categorisation should be based on sound, independent science-derived criteria.

The consumer himself/herself can make his/her food choice with regard to a balanced diet over the day. ESIP does consider the traffic light colour labelling as patronizing towards consumers as some have suggested. Rather, the traffic light colours on the front of the package serve to make the consumer aware of nutritional values, simplifying a comparison between products and making choices for a balanced diet easier.

Background

More than 200 million adults and 14 million children in the EU are overweight or obese. The number of schoolchildren in the EU who are overweight or obese is increasing by around 400,000 a year. If the trend continues, two out of three Europeans will be overweight or obese by 2030.²

Obesity, together with poor nutrition and lack of physical exercise, are among the major causes of death in Europe, leading to a range of illnesses including cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, respiratory problems and cancer. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), up to 80 percent of coronary heart diseases could be avoided by changing lifestyle factors, and around one third of cancers could be prevented by

¹ Guideline daily amounts (GDA)

² International Obesity Task Force, Obesity in Europe, March 2005

eating healthily, maintaining a normal weight and being physically active throughout life. Type-2 diabetes, formerly extremely rare amongst young people, now accounts for as many as half of all diagnoses of diabetes in some populations. The economic impact of obesity is substantial. It is estimated by the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) that between 2 and 8 percent of total health care costs in Western countries are already attributable to obesity, and this amount looks likely to increase further. Indirect costs, such as loss of working days, are difficult to quantify, but are thought to be even higher.³ For example, in Germany, nutrition-co-related diseases cause health costs of approximately 70 billion Euros per year, representing 30 % of the national expenditure on health.⁴

Studies show that there is a correlation between nutritional habits and the level of education. Compared to men and women with a higher level of education and higher income, men and women with a lower level of education and lower income eat less food with a good combination of nutrients and rather more food with a high fat and a high sugar content.

Maintaining a balanced and healthy diet is essential to preventing obesity and a comprehensible food labelling system is an indispensable tool to this end. The food label must provide all citizens regardless of their heritage and social circumstances with a clear orientation about the composition of the respective food with regard to its contribution to a healthy diet.

ESIP believes the Commission's proposal does not go far enough to support national efforts to fight the increasing incidence overweight or obese citizens, and the consequential rise in chronic diseases in the European population.

In Europe, different models of nutritional labelling exist. In the United Kingdom different models are used. Traffic light colour labelling is used as well as the GDA-description which is favoured by the food industry so that the UK food market is very well suited for studies concerning the use and comprehensibility of labelling systems. Therefore, the British Food Standards Agency (FSA) carried out a representative research study comparing these different food-labelling systems in Great Britain. In short, this study makes clear that a combination of text with the traffic light system provides the greatest clarity and usefulness to consumers. In particular, old people, the chronically ill and people with a low level of education stand to gain from this labelling system.

The FSA study is the only independent and comprehensive investigation of the comprehensibility of nutrition labelling systems in practice that does not rely exclusively on surveys. The FLABEL (EUFIC)⁵ studies cited by the food industry are limited to surveys and, considering the co-financing of these studies by large corporations in the food industry, doubts remain concerning the independence of these studies.

The reference intakes proposed by the European Commission are based on criteria devised by industry (UK's Institute of Grocery Distribution) rather than an independent body such as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Furthermore, the use of GDAs confuses the consumers by referring to percentages of reference intakes and different sizes of portions, which may clearly vary between individuals. They do not give a simple nutritional

³ European Commission, Health & Consumer Voice, newsletter, special edition, April 2005

⁴ See „Key issues paper of the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection and of the Federal Ministry of Health for the prevention of poor dietary habits, lack of physical activity, obesity and related diseases”, Germany, 4 May 2007

⁵ Project "Food Labelling to Advance Better Education for Life" (FLABEL) which is coordinated by the European Food Information Council (EUFIC).

assessment as the multiple traffic light system does, and are not as quick for consumers to use and interpret.

The multi traffic light labelling suggested by the British FSA was developed on the basis of recommendations by a group of experts representing academia, industry and consumer organisations.

Arguments in favour of the multiple traffic light system:

- it provides at a glance information about key nutrients with the most public health significance
- it is transparent and easy to understand for chronically ill people who must pay attention to their diet
- it is transparent and easy to understand for families who aim for a sugar-reduced diet for their children
- it enhances the visibility of the declaration that facilitates older people making a choice
- independent and scientific evidence exists that a coloured background for the most important nutritional values makes it easier for consumers to recognize and understand this information (FSA study)
- it provides an incentive for food manufacturers to reformulate their marketed products in favour of healthier options with reduced levels of fat, sugar and salt
- the system is based on referenced criteria: high/medium boundaries (red/amber) are based on UK Dietary Reference Values as advised by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA) and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN); the low (green) criteria reflect values set in the EU Nutrition and Health Claims Regulations.

ESIP therefore calls for a mandatory front-pack nutritional declaration in the form of the multiple traffic light system in the European Commission's proposal by introducing the following amendment:

Amendment to:

Proposal for a Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers
Article 31 paragraph 3

Commission proposal	Amendment
<p>3. The mandatory nutrition declaration shall be expressed, as appropriate, as a percentage of the reference intakes set out in Part B of Annex XI in relation to per 100g or per 100ml or per portion. When provided, the declaration on vitamins and minerals shall also be expressed as a percentage of the reference intakes set out in point 1 of Part A of Annex XI.</p>	<p>3. The mandatory nutrition declaration as set out in Article 29 (1) a of this Regulation shall appear on the front of pack and shall:</p> <p>(a) be expressed in the principal field of vision;</p> <p>(b) include a combination of “High”, “Medium” and “Low” text;</p> <p>(c) include traffic light colour coding in the colours of green, amber and red;</p>

and

(d) include a percentage of the reference intakes set out in Part B of Annex XI **per portion.**

The number of portions per pack shall be realistic and be prominently displayed, in the principal field of vision.

The definition of the reference amounts for high, medium and low levels of these nutrients shall be established in accordance with the regulatory procedure with scrutiny referred to in Article 49(3) based on an opinion of the European Food Safety Authority. This information shall be communicated per 100g or per 100ml for the combination of “High”, “Medium” and “Low” text and the traffic light colour coding in the colours of green (for low), amber (for medium) and red (for high).

When provided, the declaration on vitamins and minerals shall also be expressed as a percentage of the reference intakes set out in point 1 of Part A of Annex XI.

3a. The mandatory nutrition declaration as set out in Article 29(1) and (2) shall appear on the back of the pack and shall be expressed per 100g or per 100 ml and subject to Article 32(2) and (3), per portion.
