



Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

Public Health Association of Australia Submission on FSANZ Proposal P1049 - Carbohydrate and Sugar Claims on Alcoholic Beverages

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Preamble

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public's health in Australia.

The PHAA works to ensure that the public's health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people's health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.



Executive Summary

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the consultation on Food Standards Australia New Zealand's (FSANZ) Proposal 1059 Carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcoholic beverages. The recent allowance for alcoholic beverages to present nutritional claims on the front of packaging has led to a drastic increase in carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcohol beverages, such as "low carb" or "sugar-free".⁽¹⁾

However, these claims are used as marketing tools and mislead consumers into believing that particular alcoholic beverages are "healthy" compared to others when this is not the case.⁽²⁾ Alcohol is not only high in kilojoules and therefore unhealthy for weight management, it is a class 1 carcinogen and contributes to the high levels of family violence experienced in Australia.^(3,4) There are no "healthy" alcohols and any messaging that confuses this fact for individuals must be stymied.

For FSANZ to formally support nutritional claims on carbohydrate and sugar is inconsistent with the core objectives of FSANZ; "Protecting the health and safety of consumers" "Supporting public health nutrition" and "Labelling for informed choice".⁽⁵⁾ It is also inconsistent with previous decisions FSANZ has made concerning labelling and claims and ignores a large body of work pertaining to sugar and carbohydrate claims on non-alcoholic products.

As an organisation that has interest in both alcohol harm reduction measures and ensuring that all Australians can live in healthy environments, PHAA makes the following recommendations:

- 1. FSANZ pursue Option 3 and bar any nutrition content claims on alcohol products.**
- 2. FSANZ must revise its evidence.**
- 3. Apply Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages (Proposal 1059).**

PHAA Response to FSANZ Proposal P1049

1. FSANZ pursue Option 3 and bar any nutrition content claims on alcohol products.

FSANZ has the legislated objective of protecting consumers from harm and ensuring consumers can make informed decisions about food and beverage products.⁽⁷⁾ Allowing alcohol companies to continue to make content claims regarding sugar and carbohydrates achieves the opposite. As claims are an advertising tool, this means that individuals would be taking direction from an advertising tactic that plays on the idea of being a "healthier" choice.

It is the kilojoules contained within the alcohol itself that are the main nutritive concern and alcohol is unequivocally harmful in any amount. Explicitly allowing nutrition claims has the potential to increase the already considerable harm caused by alcohol consumption in Australia as a result of individuals perceiving the alcoholic beverage displaying the claim as "healthy" and increasing consumption. In addition, the stated rationale to support consumer choice by allowing comparisons between products to better meet consumer health needs is undermined by the display of claims, as it is the alcohol content itself which is the dominant health concern – a "healthier" alcohol beverage is one that has lower alcohol, not one with lower sugar.

Sugar, carbohydrates, or kilojoules

The promotion of carbohydrate and sugar claims has previously concerned FSANZ in the past, particularly as there was belief that such claims would encourage individuals to consider the alcoholic beverage as healthy. Despite recommendations from the Australian Dietary Guidelines, the Australian Alcohol Guidelines, and from FSANZ's own research indicating that claims did connote a healthy/healthier option to individuals, the claims were allowed, though not formally.⁽⁸⁾

FSANZ indicates in proposal P1059 that energy and alcohol content alone are the only significant pieces of health information required for individual information. PHAA agrees, as the main energy component is the alcohol itself, not the sugar or carbohydrate.⁽⁸⁾ Alcohol has almost double the number of kilojoules than carbohydrates/sugars.⁽⁸⁾ Only Alcohol and kilojoule content should be on the label.

Claims as marketing tools

Nutritional information is designed to inform the individual about what is in the product without persuasion.⁽⁹⁾ Content claims differ from nutritional information. Sugar and carbohydrate claims on alcoholic beverages are a marketing tool that are designed to sway consumers into purchasing a particular product.⁽¹⁰⁾ Claims can also be placed on the front of a product, which directly appeals to individuals and increases the chances that important information (alcohol and energy content) is overlooked.

Yet content claims are widespread on alcoholic beverages.⁽¹⁾ These claims prey on consumers who, according to FSANZ's consumer review, may be misled "Sugar/carbohydrate claims may cause consumers to make inaccurate assumptions about alcoholic beverages".⁽¹¹⁾

The study by Cao et al. (2022) found that participants viewed beverages with sugar claims as healthier and lower in alcohol compared to beverages without sugar claims.⁽¹²⁾ Similarly, Cancer Council's recent "Shape of Australia" survey found that over half of respondents agreed that a claim of "No added sugar" meant an alcoholic drink was healthier and over 37% agreed that the claim would influence their purchase decision.⁽²⁾

The "health halo" effect caused by these claims mislead consumers into believing a product is healthier than it actually is. Alcohol is harmful for public health, regardless of whether it is "low" in carbohydrates and/or sugar. FSANZ must regulate how these products can be marketed with public health as the priority.

Alcohol Harms

Alcohol is the 5th leading risk factor contributing to the total burden of disease in Australia, causing high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, liver disease, several cancers and violence related harm.⁽¹³⁾ Yet Australians are exceeding the evidence-based recommendations of the National Alcohol Guidelines.⁽¹⁴⁾

There is no healthy alcoholic beverage and there is no amount of alcohol that is safe.⁽¹⁵⁾ Any message that portrays to individuals that an alcoholic beverage is healthy is not only misleading, but could result in an increased risk of alcohol related harms and conditions.

FSANZ must take the steps necessary to fulfil its legislated objectives of 1) ensuring consumers are protected and 2) are not misled by content claims on alcoholic by pursuing Option 3.⁽⁷⁾

Recommendation:

To prevent consumers being misled by nutrition claims on alcoholic beverages, FSANZ must pursue Option 3 and not allow nutrition content claims on alcohol products.

2. FSANZ must revise the evidence

We have reviewed the evidence provided in the Consumer Literature Review for P1049 by FSANZ and have considerable concerns.

- **FSANZ has overlooked extensive research published on how sugar/carbohydrate claims impact purchasing decisions for non-alcohol products.**⁽¹⁶⁾ There is a plethora of research which shows that consumers are also more likely to purchase food products if they present a nutrition content claim.^(2,16) There is no reason to not review this evidence as it is also applicable to alcoholic beverages. It is vital that FSANZ reviews all relevant evidence when considering options 1-3.
- **There is weak evidence that sugar and carbohydrate claims on alcoholic beverages do not affect consumer alcohol intake.** The sources provided in FSANZ's review which show no association between claims and increased alcohol consumption are biased, not peer-reviewed and/or are not relevant to an Australian and New Zealand context. These studies must be excluded from the review and any FSANZ conclusions.
- **Alcohol harm related costs must be considered (e.g., burden of disease).** Alcohol contributes to 4.5% of the total disease burden in Australia and related social costs have been estimated at \$66.8 billion.^(13, 17) FSANZ must reevaluate the cost benefit analysis of pursuing option 3 and consider the health burden associated with increased alcohol consumption, as health claims could influence a person to drink more.
- **Industry assertions must be treated with caution by FSANZ.** Industry submissions to government often ignore, manipulate or misuse evidence to prevent regulation of alcoholic beverages.⁽¹⁸⁻²³⁾ FSANZ must critically analyse any assertion made by industry especially regarding labelling costs.

Recommendation:

The FSANZ must incorporate all relevant and recent evidence, exclude low-quality and biased sources, and consider the broader cost associated with alcohol related harm. We urge removing all nutritional claims from alcoholic beverages until robust, unbiased evidence shows these claims **are not** associated with an increase in alcohol consumption, and that individuals are not perceiving the drinks as healthy.

3. Apply Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages (Proposal 1059)

FSANZ has the objective of protecting consumers and assisting them to make better informed and healthier choices.⁽⁷⁾ The most effective way for FSANZ to achieve its objective is through Proposal 1059 – Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages, not through nutritional content claims.

Proposal 1059 ensures standardised and mandatory energy labelling on all alcoholic beverages. Including kilojoule levels presented in an energy information panel that will assist individuals to make informed decisions about alcoholic beverages without misleading consumers. For, as stated, alcohol and energy content are the only important nutrition metrics to include on a label.⁽²⁴⁾

FSANZ must progress proposal P1059 - Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages and not allow it to be delayed due to Proposal P1049 - Carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcoholic beverages.

Recommendation

Prioritise the Proposal 1059 - Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages as this provides the necessary information required for consumers to make an informed choice about alcoholic beverages.

Conclusion

PHAA disagrees with the proposal to formally permit carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcoholic beverages. We believe the result will mislead individuals into perceiving the alcoholic beverage as having healthy qualities and may influence an increased intake of alcohol. We are keen to emphasise the following points:

1. FSANZ pursue Option 3 and bar any nutrition content claims on alcohol products.
2. FSANZ must revise its evidence.
3. Progress and apply Energy Labelling on Alcoholic Beverages (Proposal 1059).

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and the opportunity to express the views of our expert members.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.



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