

Big Food backs color-coded labels in Europe

-- By Emmet Livingstone

3/8/17, 7:00 AM CET

Six major companies on Wednesday dropped their opposition to colored food labels in Europe, pledging to roll out the nutritional guides across the Continent.

Coca-Cola, Mars, Mondelēz, Nestlé, Pepsi and Unilever all committed to a color labeling scheme for the European market under which green, amber and red labels — so-called traffic lights — will show the relative nutritional information of products.

The move, cautiously welcomed by health campaigners, is a proactive move by some of the food industry's key players (with some notable exceptions) to avoid a patchwork of national legislation, which some fear is on the horizon.

The pledge marks an 180-degree reversal by Mondelēz and Unilever — two companies that did not subscribe to a 2013 voluntary traffic-light initiative in the U.K. criticized for hurting trade — signaling that perhaps the sands are beginning to shift on labeling.

"I'm basically delighted that they're proposing to use color coding," said Mike Rayner, a professor of population health at the University of Oxford, who added that the system's benefits have been "obvious ... for a long time."

Act now, (hopefully) save later

The plan has as much to do with bottom lines as with waistlines.

The British scheme generated admirers, too, and in late 2015 the French health ministry promised to combat obesity with its own color-coded food labels. It is due to announce its scheme imminently.

The Europe Director of Public Affairs for Mondelēz, Francesco Tramontin, said the joint initiative would allow companies to roll out a single label across the EU and possibly avoid having to adhere to an array of different national rules as other countries bring in their own rules.

David Coleman, the vice president for public affairs at Mars' European branch, said the initiative was good for business and consumers alike.

"You can have academics talking and debating this for years and the one who loses out is the consumer — or the businesses, because you have multiple schemes all over the place," he said. "That has a cost attached to it."

Yet the six companies still have to hammer out many of the details. They plan to set up a task force gathering NGOs, consumer groups, government agencies, supermarket groups and other companies, in order to figure out specifics.

The companies also said that they want to encourage smaller portion sizes — a move health campaigners have long advocated. However, the companies are also aiming to tweak how the labels show portions, which could change the proportion of products issued with a red label.

At present, the U.K. scheme decides whether the fat, salt or sugar contents of a product earns a red label based on an assumed 100 gram portion size — even though many of the products themselves are below 100g. Proponents argue that this accounts for snackers going back for multiple servings, however, industry argues this tips the scale unfairly toward red labels.

Effects both shallow and profound

While health campaigners mostly favor color-coded labels, many caution that there is no one magic bullet.

ANSES, the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety, recently argued there is little evidence to prove colorful food labels reduce obesity, diabetes, or other noncommunicable diseases.

The companies agree. “Labeling itself will not solve the obesity problem,” said Tramontin from Mondelez, adding that it was just one tool among many.

Health campaigners have given the companies’ plan a tepid welcome.

The European Heart Network, an NGO, urged caution saying it didn’t think a labeling scheme such as this one — normally intended to inform consumers about quality rather than quantity — could effectively promote smaller portion sizes.

Nina Renshaw, the secretary-general of the European Public Health Alliance, an NGO, welcomed the move, but still favored binding EU-wide rules, which would require a lengthy revision of the bloc’s food legislation.

Renshaw added that the lack of involvement from other food giants such as Kellogg, Danone, Kraft-Heinz and Ferrero also demonstrated the need for mandatory regulation.

However, for companies to take up colorful labels at all has won them some praise.

Rayner, of Oxford University, said the principal benefit of the U.K.’s scheme was that in some cases firms were so desperate to avoid red labels that they changed their ingredients.

Academic research showed the effects of color-coded labeling are “pretty small” for the individual, Rayner said, but added that these grow significantly when applied to the population as a whole.