

Australian Grape & Wine submission to the Australian Government on the Codex Committee on Food Labelling Circular Letter ([CL 2024/13-FL](#)) - Request for information on the labelling of alcoholic beverages

General Position

Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit comment to Codex Australia in support of the Australian Government position on the provided Circular Letter (CL) CL 2024/13-FL to inform the development of a paper on Alcohol labelling. Australian Grape & Wine is Australia's national association of grape and wine producers. We represent the interests of the more than 2,000 wine producers and 6,000 grape growers across Australia's 65 wine regions. We have sought industry feedback in formulating the positions that follow and provide them to you on behalf of the Australian grape and wine sector.

As a broad overarching position Australian Grape & Wine does not support the progression of the Alcohol labelling paper within the Codex Committee of Food Labelling (CCFL). We ask that the Australian Government, through Codex Australia, strongly oppose progression of this item at the forthcoming CCFL48 meetings.

According to the Codex procedures, the Director Generals of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) can place items on the agenda of Codex meetings and Codex members can discuss and make decisions about how to take the matters forward. However, since this paper was first raised as an item of future work at CCFL44 in October 2017 by the WHO, there has been no Codex member country willing to progress the paper.

As stated by a number of Codex member countries at the time, the work is outside the scope and role of CCFL. CCFL establishes standards for all food which includes alcoholic beverages. It does not single out product categories to develop individual standards as it is not within the bounds of CCFLs role. It has been acknowledged in previous CCFL meetings including CCFL45 that a number of existing Codex standards already include provisions for Alcohol including the General Standard For The Labelling of Prepackaged Foods (GSLPF) and others. We consider that the GSLPF applies to alcoholic beverages as has been clarified by the Codex secretariate. There has been no justification to shift this long held convention.

Furthermore, it was acknowledged in these previous CCFL meetings that alcoholic beverages are already heavily regulated at a national level (including Australia) and that there was a significant body of existing work through international organizations such as the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV) to provide international guidance and standards for alcohol labelling. This is because on-label messaging about alcoholic beverages, and the enforcement of alcohol regulations, fall properly within the purview of national governments as they must take account of country-specific and regional differences in attitudes towards alcohol use and consumption patterns.

Circular Letter input

In the absence of any member state being willing to lead this work, the WHO is leading the

development of a Codex paper on the alcohol labelling issue. This seems to be a clear example of overreach and goes beyond the scope of the organization's remit within the Codex. This is further emphasised by the use of leading, inaccurate and inflammatory language in the CL in order to elicit a response from Codex member states. The structure of questions used in the CL assumes progression of this work on alcohol labelling which has not yet been agreed by Codex members. CCFL47 retained the item on labelling of alcoholic beverages only at the request of the WHO, with the WHO to prepare a discussion paper for consideration at CCFL48. This undermines the intention of Codex to act in response to issues raised by *member states* and in the interests of members' priorities.

Further highlighting that the WHO is not appropriate to be progressing Codex work is the use of language that is inconsistent with previous overarching WHO declarations in background information provided in the CL. In the WHO's last [Political declaration on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, and mental health](#) of January 2023, a clear focus was made on the need to "*reduce the harmful use of alcohol*" and not consumption *per se*, whereas in the background to the circular letter addressed to Codex members to help inform replies to the questionnaire, the first item under point 5 stresses that "*the alcohol use resulted in 2.6 million deaths and contributes to 4.7% of the global burden of Disease in 2019*". The latter consideration is therefore not in line with the current mandate given to the WHO by Members of the World Health Assembly and its Executive Board.

It is also unclear why it is appropriate for CCFL members to be asked about delivering on separate WHO recommendations in the Global Action Plan on Alcohol 2022-2030 that was endorsed by the 76th Session of the World Health Assembly. These are not recommendations that were adopted by Codex, or its members directly, yet they are used as the basis for Question 1 of the CL.

Question 1

Noting our overarching positions above, if this work were to proceed Australian Grape & Wine makes the following comments on the items outlined in the CL.

Health-related information - In general we strongly disagree with the inclusion of specific CCFL provisions related to health-related information. Codex, at its core, is about food safety. Its remit is not to provide health related information such as drinking guidelines or warning statements. This type of information is more appropriate to be provided by national government authorities. Specifically drinking guidelines are prominent at a national government level and are not a direct aspect of labelling which would be relevant to such work. Australia already possesses national regulations around health warnings (related to pregnancy) as do many other countries. These aspects do not relate to food safety and are beyond the scope of Codex.

The only item with some relevance (if such work were to progress) relates to Alcohol by volume (ABV) statements. ABV statements are a crucial piece of safety information mandated by many countries including Australia. Noting that any further work would not necessitate a specific alcohol beverage standard but could for instance rightfully fit in a reviewed version of the Codex General Standard for the labelling of prepackaged food.

Nutrition-related information – Relevance to food safety is again a critical factor in our response to the relevance of these items to Codex work. Allergen information is the most relevant item in this list as it relates to food safety. Most countries already have national regulations to mandate allergen labelling and we note that CCFL is already undertaking work on precautionary allergen labelling, a regulatory area in which Australia is a leader. For these reasons, we strongly disagree with further work being undertaken specific to allergen labelling of alcoholic beverages.

The remaining items, in particular energy, carbohydrate, and sugar, are not necessarily related to food safety, but rather, consumer information. We recognize that this is information that supports the provision of consumer understanding and how people choose the products they consume. Alcoholic beverages have for many years been exempt from such requirements, however, a number of countries, including Australia, have adopted or are implementing national requirements for alcohol. A number of these have included provisions for off-label solutions to provide consumers with this information. While we recognise that this information may be of interest to some consumers, these provisions are already being adopted by a number of national governments, and this is the appropriate mechanism for such labelling requirements to be developed. Furthermore, CCFL is currently undertaking work on added sugar, with a paper expected at CCFL48.

The remaining items are irrelevant and unnecessary for wine as their presence in wine is negligible. We strongly disagree with inclusion of future work on these items.

Restrictions on nutrition claims & Restrictions on health claims – We strongly disagree with undertaking Codex work on restrictions on health or nutritional claims for alcoholic beverages. Codex already has the [Codex General Guidelines on Claims](#) which apply to all food, including alcoholic beverages. If Codex were to consider restrictions on such claims it would need to be done with sound scientific justification. It would also need to be applied equally across all food categories and potentially applied to other products that can have adverse impacts on consumer health and nutrition such as those high in sugar, fats or sodium content.

Furthermore, if claims have sound scientific justification, are clearly communicated and truthful in nature, restricting the provision of that information to consumers is contradictory to supporting consumers to understand the products they consumer.

Australia as well as other countries already have national restrictions on nutritional claims that can be made for food and beverage products which apply to alcoholic beverages.

Exemptions – It is unclear what this refers to beyond the example used in the CL of “E.g. for alcoholic beverages with low levels of alcohol by volume, including developing a standard definition of *low level of alcohol*.” We note that as alcoholic beverages (including “low level alcoholic beverages”) are considered a food under Codex, any effort considering how to define “low level of alcohol” for these products should align with the levels of alcohol (Ethanol) that are naturally occurring in some other “non-alcoholic foods” for example orange juice.

Any other labelling requirements not considered above – Strongly disagree for reasons mentioned above.

Question 2

We strongly disagree with progression of this work under Codex for the reasons noted above. However, if any work were to proceed, we assert that it should only be completed within the bounds of the existing Codex scope of work and existing standards.

Question 3

Australian Grape & Wine does not support revising existing definitions or developing new definitions to include alcoholic beverages or drinks. At CCFL45 the Codex Secretariat “clarified that the definition for food in the Codex Procedural Manual covers alcoholic beverages and there are several Codex texts relating to food safety that specifically address alcoholic beverages”.

We ask that the Australian Government strongly disagrees with all of these options.

Question 4

Australian Grape & Wine is concerned by the fact that this work is advancing, despite the unwillingness of member states to support or drive it themselves. For the credibility of the organization, it is critical that member states drive the agenda, rather than the WHO or FAO Secretariat. We are also concerned that this work deviates from the Codex mandate to focus on science-based food safety standards and would be duplicative of work already taking place at the national level and in other intergovernmental organisations. As a member-driven organisation, Codex should be led by work supported by member states.

Given the significance of this potential work to the Australian wine sector we would welcome the opportunity to continue to engage the Australian Government Codex representatives on these matters.

We ask that you also respond to Australian Grape & Wine regarding the whole of government response to the CL and acknowledge how our feedback will be addressed.

Contact

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