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Consumer/Health Groups Call for Meaningful Change in How Treasury Department Regulates Alcohol Labeling

*Letter to Treasury Secretary-Designate Timothy Geithner Urges Swift Action to Mandate
Standardized, Comprehensive Alcohol Labels*

Washington, DC; December 12, 2008 -- Even as the Obama Administration sets its sights on stabilizing and strengthening the U.S. economy, a coalition of public interest groups today called on the transition team and incoming Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to move quickly on another matter where action by the Treasury Department is needed and long overdue: requiring mandatory, basic serving facts disclosing alcohol content per serving and the definition of moderate, or low-risk alcohol consumption on all alcoholic beverage labels.

In a letter to Secretary-Designate Geithner, four leading public interest groups -- Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, National Consumers League and Shape Up America! -- used the fifth anniversary of an unanswered petition originally sent to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) on December 16, 2003 to press for “meaningful change” in how the Treasury Department regulates alcohol labeling. Summarizing a record of more than 30 years of inaction by TTB and its predecessor agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), the organizations reported overwhelming public support for a standardized “Alcohol Facts” panel on all beer, wine and distilled spirits products listing such basic information as the serving size, calories per serving, alcohol content per serving, and the definition of a “standard drink.” Additionally, the petition sought the inclusion of the Dietary Guidelines’ definition of moderate, or low-risk, alcohol consumption on product labels. Today, alcoholic beverages are the only major category of consumable products not required to carry label information summarizing these basic characteristics of the product.

“Right now, consumers really have no way of knowing the most basic information about alcoholic beverages,” said Chris Waldrop, Director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America. “It’s time to end the confusion by giving Americans the same helpful and easily accessible labeling information that is now required for conventional foods, dietary supplements, and nonprescription drugs.”

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George Hacker, Director of CSPI's Alcohol Policies Project, called on TTB, which regulates alcohol labeling, to develop labels that will be helpful to consumers in measuring and moderating their alcohol consumption. "The Food and Drug Administration, which has administered the development of comprehensive nutrition labeling on foods and non-alcoholic beverages, has substantial expertise in constructing and designing labels that consumers will understand and use. TTB should consult with FDA and rely on its experience in generating effective consumer labels."

Documenting the public health need for TTB action, the letter summarizes the consensus among nutrition, medical and substance abuse experts that ready access to labeling information is an important tool for reducing alcohol abuse, drunk driving, and the many diseases attributable to excessive alcohol intake. This includes the facts needed to follow the *Dietary Guidelines*' advice that men who choose to drink limit their consumption to two drinks a day and that women restrict their consumption to one drink per day. As stated in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*, the consumption of alcoholic beverages may have beneficial effects for some consumers when consumed in moderation, but alcohol is a significant source of calories and can increase the risk for hypertension, liver disease and certain cancers, as well as injury if consumed in excess.

"There is no debate within the public health and nutrition community about the need for mandatory and complete alcohol labeling," said Dr. Barbara J. Moore, President and CEO of Shape Up America! "Today's labeling requirements for alcoholic beverages are outdated and they don't demonstrate the national leadership that is critically needed to address the growing epidemic of obesity."

Due to the current lack of leadership, the organizations point to one of the consequences of not requiring consistent and comprehensive alcohol labeling: most Americans have no idea what constitutes a "standard drink," which the *Dietary Guidelines* defines as 12 fluid ounces of regular beer, 5 fluid ounces of wine and 1.5 fluid ounces of 80-proof (40 percent) distilled spirits. According to a recent survey commissioned by the National Consumers League, 54 percent of Americans don't know there is such a thing as a "standard drink," even though a large majority of state drivers' license manuals and national and state public health agencies use the "standard drink" definition to explain responsible drinking.

"It shouldn't take a calculator for consumers to tell how many 'standard drinks' are in a particular product or to determine how much alcohol they are actually consuming," said Sally Greenberg, Executive Director of the National Consumers League. "On behalf of the nation's public health and nutrition organizations, consumer advocates, leading public health officials and consumers themselves, we say it is time for the government to issue a useful final regulation requiring alcohol labeling."

While continuing to press for a useful final regulation on alcohol labeling, the four public interest organizations are taking steps to fill the void by providing consumers with information about alcohol content and what constitutes moderate drinking. Especially during the holidays, Americans should have these facts:

- When it comes to drinking alcohol, the old adage is true: It doesn't matter what you drink, it's really how much that counts. Don't kid yourself into thinking beer or wine is "safer" or less "potent" than the "hard stuff."

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- One of the most important tips about responsible drinking is to know how much you are drinking. So, remember, 12 ounces of regular beer has the same amount of alcohol as five ounces of wine and an ounce and a half of distilled spirits.
- Alcohol affects women differently than men. Besides producing less of the enzyme responsible for breaking down alcohol, women generally have a lower percentage of natural body water than men, which means alcohol levels are more concentrated and women are likely to feel the effects (including the onset of alcohol-related diseases) sooner. In light of these differences, the *Dietary Guidelines* recommends that women consume less alcohol -- up to one standard drink a day while men are advised to limit their consumption to two alcohol drinks a day.
- Sometimes the wisest decision is not to drink. This is the case if you are younger than the minimum legal drinking age, pregnant, driving or operating machinery, or simply cannot control your drinking.
- In many cases, alcohol and medications don't mix. Always read the label to determine if the prescription medicine or over-the-counter drug carries a specific warning about consuming alcohol.
- If you are hosting a party, don't over-serve alcohol and keep an eye out for anyone who may have had too much to drink and is planning to drive home. If necessary, take their keys and call a taxi. Have plenty of non-alcoholic beverage choices available.
- The obvious tip that everybody knows but sometimes forgets: before you go out, plan how you are going to get home. Designate a driver, have a taxi number, and have money ready to pay the taxi. Whatever you do, don't drink and drive and plan on staying sober.
- Whether you are a parent, family member or a friend, don't serve to or buy alcohol for people under 21.

Increasing public understanding of these basic health messages also requires ending the stalemate in modernizing beverage alcohol labels, which traces back to 1972, when consumer organizations first asked the federal government to require meaningful alcohol labeling. In 2003, the National Consumers League joined with the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America and 75 other public health and consumer organizations to submit a formal petition to TTB. This resulted in the agency issuing an "advanced notice of proposed rulemaking" in April 2005 and receiving more than 18,000 comments, of which 96 percent supported giving consumers access to standardized and complete labeling information on beer, wine and distilled spirits labels.

TTB's most recent action occurred in 2007 when the agency proposed a mandatory "Serving Facts" panel on beer, wine and distilled spirits but notably ignored the most important information consumers need when consuming an alcoholic beverage – alcohol content disclosure and the amount of alcohol in a serving. This resulted in another barrage of letters from consumers and public health leaders, all calling for more complete information on the label. Since the close of the public comment period in February 2008, TTB has not moved forward with issuing final regulations.

To view a copy of the letter to Secretary-Designate Geithner, go to www.nclnet.org.

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About the Center for Science in the Public Interest

Since 1971, the Center for Science in the Public Interest has been a strong advocate for nutrition and health, food safety, alcohol policy, and sound science. Founded by executive director Michael Jacobson, Ph.D. and two other scientists, CSPI has long sought to educate the public, advocate government policies that are consistent with scientific evidence on health and environmental issues, and counter industry’s powerful influence on public opinion and public policies.

About the Consumer Federation of America

Consumer Federation of America is a non-profit association of some 300 organizations, with a combined membership of over 50 million Americans. Since its founding in 1968, CFA has worked to advance the interest of American consumers through research, education and advocacy. CFA’s Food Policy Institute was created in 1999 and engages in research, education and advocacy on food and agricultural policy, agricultural biotechnology, food safety and nutrition.

About the National Consumers League

Founded in 1899, the National Consumers League is America’s pioneer consumer organization. Its mission is to protect and promote social and economic justice for consumers and workers in the United States and abroad. NCL is a private, nonprofit membership organization. For more information, visit www.nclnet.org.

About Shape Up America!

Shape Up America! was founded in 1994 by former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to raise awareness of the health effects of obesity and to provide responsible information on weight management to the public and to health care professionals. The organization maintains an award winning website – www.shapeup.org – accessed by more than 100,000 visitors each month and an “opt-in” e-newsletter with more than 24,000 subscribers.

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