



## Update Alcohol Policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Platform to Give Americans the Facts to Drink Responsibly

Even as the new Administration takes steps to stabilize and strengthen the U.S. economy and reform the nation's ailing health care system, little attention is being paid to outdated alcohol policies that if changed, could reduce the nation's obesity crisis and such pressing problems as underage drinking, binge drinking, and drunk driving. Thus, it is time for Congress and the Obama Administration to reinforce our alcohol policies by providing consumers with adequate information and guidelines for responsible drinking.

Several simple steps could strengthen the nation's alcohol policy. These steps are not difficult, complicated or expensive.

1. **Provide detailed advice on responsible alcohol consumption levels for the public when the revised *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are issued in 2010, with a specific focus on what constitutes a "standard drink" and the calorie content of "non-standard" mixed alcoholic drinks now gaining in popularity.**

Although the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, federal and state agencies and numerous public health groups define a "standard drink" as 12 fluid ounces of regular beer, 5 fluid ounces of wine and 1.5 fluid ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits, there is insufficient information in the marketplace for consumers to understand this definition. Closing this knowledge gap requires putting the "standard drink" definition into context for the public and underscoring the message that standard serving sizes of all alcohol beverages -- beer, wine, and distilled spirits -- are equal in alcohol strength and their effect on the body. Also, because many "non-standard" drinks, such as alcoholic energy drinks, sweet liquor products and mixed drinks containing multiple sources of alcohol, have grown in popularity, consumers would benefit if the chart included with the *Dietary Guidelines* were updated to include the calorie content of these popular "non-standard" drinks.

2. **Make increased access to alcohol content information a new health objective when the federal government issues *Healthy People 2020*, the ten-year goals that will guide national health policy.**

Based on government estimates that more than 55 percent of American adults consume alcohol, the *Healthy People* national health objectives, issued every ten years since 1979, include specific goals related to alcohol use, including the 2010 objective of reducing the proportion of adults who exceed the *Dietary Guidelines* advice for moderate drinking, which is defined as up to two standard drinks a day for men and one for women. But despite research that finds nearly 20 percent of current drinkers regularly consume in excess of this amount, there has yet to be a national health goal to provide consumers with accessible information about what constitutes moderate drinking. Moreover, while

there are specific health objectives to limit specific macronutrients in the diet, none address limiting the number of calories from alcohol, despite the fact that alcohol contributes 7 calories per gram, almost twice the 4 calories per gram from carbohydrates. Thus, if Americans are going to meet the *Healthy People 2020* health goals, they will need clear information about the amount of alcohol and calories they are consuming from alcohol beverages.

3. **Issue a final regulation this year requiring standardized labeling information on beer, wine and distilled spirits products that discloses the alcohol and calorie content per serving and facts about specific ingredients.**

Despite serious problems with underage drinking, binge drinking, drunk driving, and obesity, American consumers can't easily track the amount of alcohol and calories in the alcoholic beverages they drink. Thus, since 1972, consumer organizations and the public health community have advocated for the same easily accessible labeling information on alcoholic beverages that is now required for conventional foods, dietary supplements, and nonprescription drugs. Unfortunately, however, the actions by TTB and its predecessor agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), have been late in coming and largely ineffective, including the proposed rule issued by TTB in 2007, which leaves out the most important information consumers need when consuming an alcoholic beverage – alcohol content disclosure and the amount of alcohol in a serving. But based on the record in the current rulemaking, the Obama Administration should act now to issue a final regulation requiring a standardized label listing the alcohol content, the amount of alcohol per serving, the definition of a standard drink, the number of calories and facts about other ingredients. Anything short of this information leaves alcoholic beverages as an enormous blind spot in the American diet and remains a failure of the regulatory process.

4. **Pass new federal legislation that will expand underage drinking prevention efforts in the U.S.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), underage drinkers are responsible for 11 percent of all the beverage alcohol consumed in the U.S. and on average, consume more drinks per occasion than adults. Moreover, new research on brain development shows that adolescent brains are not fully developed before age 21, and alcohol abuse damages this development process. To address this serious problem for America's youth, the public health community is advocating for swift passage of H.R. 1028 -- the "Support 21 Act of 2009" -- which allocates an additional \$35.5 million to federal and state efforts to reduce underage drinking. While recognizing that lowering the drinking age is not the answer, the bill focuses on delaying alcohol use through education and a stronger focus within the CDC on disseminating research on effective strategies to reduce underage drinking. The bill also calls for a National Academies of Science report on available research regarding the impact of alcohol on adolescent brain development and the public policy implications of that research.

The facts boil down to this: the need to strengthen alcohol policy has been unaddressed for too long. Now is the time for Congress and the Obama Administration to make meaningful change both in how information about the content of alcoholic beverages is communicated to the public and how the nation mobilizes to reduce underage drinking. It's time for change we can believe in.

National  
Consumers League



---

---

Sally Greenberg  
Executive Director

Shape Up America!



---

Barbara Moore, Ph.D.  
President & CEO

Consumer Federation  
of America



Christopher Waldrop  
Director, Food Policy  
Institute

Center for Science  
in the Public Interest



---

George Hacker  
Director, Alcohol Policies  
Project