



Contact: Katie Christopher
Shape Up America!
202-974-5084
christopherk@ruderfmn.com

Chris Waldrop
Consumer Federation of America
202-797-8551
cwaldrop@consumerfed.org

Carol McKay
National Consumers League
412-408-3688
724-799-5392 (cell)
carolm@nclnet.org

George Hacker
Center for Science in the Public Interest
202- 332-9110
ghacker@cspinet.org

Consumer/Nutrition Groups Urge Obama Administration and Congress to Update Alcohol Policies for the 21st Century

Organizations Issue Four-Step Plan Calling for Mandatory Alcohol Labeling and More Resources to Combat Underage Drinking

Washington, DC; April 23, 2009 -- A coalition of public interest groups today called on Congress and the Obama Administration to overturn decades of inattention to the nation's alcohol policies by finally issuing a useful final regulation to require standardized labeling information on beer, wine and distilled spirits products and providing the government resources needed to address such pressing problems as underage drinking, binge drinking, and drunk driving.

Using the observance of National Alcohol Awareness Month to rally attention, four leading nutrition and consumer advocacy organizations -- Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, the National Consumers League, and Shape Up America! -- released a new action plan, *Alcohol Policy for the 21st Century: A Platform to Give Americans the Facts to Drink Responsibly*, intended to bring the nation's policies into the 21st century. Issued as a nationwide call to action, the platform urges the new Administration and Congress to make meaningful changes both in how information about the content of alcoholic beverages is communicated to the public and how the nation mobilizes to reduce underage drinking.

Specifically, the platform urges swift action on four regulatory and legislative measures:

1. Gaining swift action by the Treasury Department's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) to issue a final regulation that requires complete and easy-to-read labeling information on all beer, wine and distilled spirits products. To provide the information needed for consumers to make informed purchasing and consumption decisions, the advocates continue to press for a standardized "Alcohol Facts" panel that lists the alcohol content, the amount of alcohol per serving, the definition of a standard drink, the number of calories and facts about other ingredients.

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2. Enlisting the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to make increased access to alcohol content information a new national health objective when HHS issues *Healthy People 2020*, the updated ten-year health goals, in early 2010.
3. Including detailed advice on responsible alcohol consumption levels for the public when HHS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) release the revised *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* 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.
4. Gaining Congressional passage of the "Support 21 Act of 2009," which will expand the nation’s underage drinking prevention efforts by allocating an additional \$35.5 million to federal and state programs.

Among these actions, the top priority for the public health community is for TTB to move quickly to issue a consumer friendly final alcohol labeling regulation. This step would end the stalemate in modernizing beverage alcohol labels that traces back to 1972, when consumer organizations first asked the federal government to require meaningful alcohol labeling. In 2003, the National Consumers League, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America and 75 other public health and consumer organizations submitted a formal petition to TTB resulting in the agency issuing an “advanced notice of proposed rulemaking” in April 2005. Then, in 2007, TTB proposed a mandatory “Serving Facts” panel on beer, wine and distilled spirits that left out alcohol content and the amount of alcohol in a serving and was widely attacked by consumer groups and the public health community for being incomplete.

“There is no debate within the public health and consumer community about the need for mandatory and complete alcohol labeling,” said Chris Waldrop, Director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America. “It’s time to give consumers the same helpful and easily accessible labeling information that is now required for conventional foods, dietary supplements, and nonprescription drugs.”

Although TTB’s 2007 actions were roundly criticized, the advocacy groups believe the record in the current rulemaking is sufficient for the agency to act now to issue a final alcohol labeling regulation in 2009. The advocates also urge TTB to consult with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regarding the most effective format and graphic design for the “Alcohol Facts” label.

George Hacker, Director of CSPI's Alcohol Policies Project, said: “TTB has had a comprehensive response to its haphazard rulemaking to develop labels that will be helpful to consumers in measuring and moderating their alcohol consumption. The agency should accept the guidance it has received and find the political will to act.”

From a public health perspective, the advocacy organizations also urge HHS and USDA to provide detailed information on what constitutes a “standard drink” and the calorie content of popular “non-standard” mixed alcoholic drinks when the departments issue the updated *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* in 2010. The reason, according to the advocates, is insufficient information in the marketplace for consumers to know what constitutes a “standard drink” -- 12 ounces of regular beer, 5 ounces of wine and 1.5 ounces of 80-proof (40%) distilled spirits -- and to understand that standard serving sizes of beer, wine and spirits are equal in alcohol strength and their effect on the body. As a

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result, research finds nearly 20 percent of current drinkers regularly consume more than the up to two standard drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women that the *Dietary Guidelines* defines a moderate drinking.

“Those consumers who choose to drink absolutely need alcohol and calorie information per serving to help them comply with recommendations in the *Dietary Guidelines*,” said Sally Greenberg, Executive Director of the National Consumers League. “Without it, alcohol consumers continue to be left in the dark.”

The alcohol platform encourages HHS to add specific objectives to the upcoming *Healthy People 2020* national health goals that reflect the current scientific knowledge about the calorie content of alcoholic beverages. Because alcohol is metabolized quite differently from these other macronutrients and provides 7 calories per gram compared to 4 calories per gram for carbohydrates, increased access to alcohol content information through nutrition counseling and government education initiatives is needed both to combat the obesity epidemic and to reduce alcohol-related mortality resulting from hypertension, liver disease and certain cancers, as well as injury.

“ To encourage weight management and reduce the health risks associated with alcohol requires that the 55 percent of adult Americans who drink have the information they need to make responsible decisions,” said Barbara J. Moore, Ph.D., president of Shape Up America!, “Anything less is a setback for public health.”

Addressing the pervasive problem of underage drinking, the platform calls on Congress to pass 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. 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (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.

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 view a copy of the alcohol policy platform, go to www.nclnet.org/news.

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.

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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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