

## CITIZEN'S SUMMARY

# Helping citizens make healthier dietary choices

Europeans will soon get clearer information about the food and drinks they purchase thanks to a European Commission proposal that is improving the European Union's food labelling rules. On January 30, 2008, the Commission adopted a draft Regulation ensuring that a product's essential nutritional information will be provided on its packaging in a legible and comprehensible manner.

### **What is the problem?**

The current food labelling legislation is outdated. The general food labelling legislation has been in force since 1978, while the existing nutrition labelling rules were adopted in 1990. Since then, the number of products has increased considerably and the way marketing is done has evolved. So have consumer demands. For example, many consumers now buy their food via the Internet. They need to get the same information as those who do their shopping at the supermarket.

It is not an easy task to update the legislation. Labels have become more and more complex over the years and consumers are flooded with information. There is, therefore, a real need for a system that allows consumers, on one hand, to access easily the important information on food labels, and businesses, on the other, to keep being innovative.

### **Clearer information**

The proposal makes it mandatory to provide nutrition information at the front of the package of all pre-packaged foods. There, the consumer would be able to find information on the product's energy, fat, saturated fat, salt and carbohydrates with specific reference to the content in sugars. These will be expressed in terms of per 100ml/100g or per portion.

The essential information has to be presented in a legible way. The draft regulation stipulates that the minimum print size would be 3mm. Also there has to be a significant contrast between the writing and the label's background.

### **Would all products bear nutrition information?**

The proposal lists the foods which would be exempt from the obligation to provide nutrition information: these are unprocessed foods, such as fresh steak and apples, or foods that do not have high energy levels, like teas, coffees, herbs, spices and vinegars. Water is also on this list.

The regulation applies also, as from its entry into force, to some alcoholic drinks. Ready-to-drink mixed alcoholic beverages, often referred to as alcopops, will have to carry an ingredients list and nutrition information.

### **Food causing allergic reactions**

Given the fact that seven out of ten severe allergic reactions happen when people eat out, the new rules ensure that information on allergens in non-prepackaged food should always be available. Restaurants or other catering establishments will have to display or make allergen information available at consumer request. There is already an EU list of identified allergens, for which information must be labelled. Peanuts, milk, fish and mustard are some of the foods on this list.

### **Who stands to gain from this?**

The Commission's proposal, in a nutshell, simplifies the rules. It clarifies and modernises food labelling legislation for the benefit of consumers, businesses and control authorities alike.

The availability of clear information should help citizens to better understand the composition of different foods and especially how it can contribute to their overall diets. This draft regulation, once enforced, would help Europeans to adopt, if they so wish, healthier eating habits on the basis of an informed choice.

The draft regulation sets out clearer and simpler rules facilitating compliance and proper implementation by Member States. They are also going to create a fairer system for all food operators throughout Europe which, at present, have to cope with different national rules.

### **When is the proposal going to come into effect?**

The draft regulation will soon be submitted to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, for scrutiny and debate under a procedure known as "co-decision." At this stage, no accurate prediction can be made as to when this co-decision process will come to an end. In any case, there will be a transition period of three years for the application of the new rules. The Commission hopes that matters can proceed quickly, so that the benefits of the regulation can be gained as soon as possible.

**End**