

European Commission: lobbyists block nutritional labelling

Nutri-Score is a labelling system for food and beverages that informs consumers about the product's nutritional quality. The label is displayed on food packaging on a voluntary basis by manufacturers, and by supermarket chains on their own-brand products (1). By mid-2024, it had already been adopted by eight European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland (2).

The European Commission had pledged to propose a harmonised, mandatory, EU-wide nutritional labelling system by the end of 2022. Agri-food lobby groups have succeeded in blocking this move.

Foodwatch, a non-profit organisation that works to defend the interests of consumers in the food sector and accepts no funding from public authorities or the food industry, submitted a request to the European Commission for access to documents relating to the meetings held in 2022 by its Directorate-Generals for health and agriculture. An analysis of these documents was conducted by the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), an umbrella group for 45 consumer groups from 31 countries, which it represents to European institutions. The analysis revealed that while the Directorate-General for health met representatives of the agri-food industry 17 times, it met only twice with civil society representatives (3-5).

Italy's government and food industry were especially strongly opposed to nutritional labelling, and the Nutri-Score in particular, and intensified their meetings with the Directorate-General for agriculture in late 2022 (5). Their representatives employed all manner of counter-arguments in these meetings, including: scaremongering about increased immigration to Europe from cocoa-producing countries if products containing chocolate and sugar were poorly rated; and falsely asserting that there is no scientific evidence for the effectiveness of the Nutri-Score, despite numerous studies, conducted in France and other European countries, showing that it is understandable to consumers and guides them towards healthier food choices (5,6).

The algorithm used to calculate the Nutri-Score for food products and beverages was updated on 1 January 2024, in particular for greater alignment with the main dietary recommendations in force in European Union countries. For example, under the new algorithm, oily fish and oils with a lower saturated fat content are rated more favourably, poultry is better rated than red meat, and beverages with a high sugar content or containing artificial sweeteners receive a worse rating. Manufacturers have 2 years to update the Nutri-Score on their products (7).

Alongside other necessary measures to ensure that Europe's populations have access to healthy, affordable and sustainable diets, the Nutri-Score is already helping consumers choose foods that are better for their health (8). But European institutions have bowed to economic interests, to the detriment of public health.

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References 1- "La France ne protège pas suffisamment les enfants contre la 'malbouffe'" *Rev Prescrire* 2020; 40 (435): 62-64. 2- Santé Publique France "Nutri-Score" updated 22 December 2023. santepubliquefrance.fr accessed 3 January 2024: 4 pages. 3- Foodwatch "About us - Challenging food industry practices". foodwatch.org accessed 13 February 2024: 5 pages. 4- BEUC "Who we are - Consumers on the European stage". beuc.eu accessed 13 February 2024: 2 pages. 5- Calvert E "Food label ambush: how intense industry lobbying halted EU plans" BEUC 9 October 2023. www.beuc.eu accessed 3 January 2024: 5 pages. 6- French Ministry of Health "Nutri-Score. Évaluation à 3 ans du logo nutritionnel Nutri-Score". sante.gouv.fr accessed 3 January 2024: 1 page. 7- Santé Publique France "L'algorithme de calcul du Nutri-Score évolue pour promouvoir des choix alimentaires plus favorables à la santé" Press Release 24 April 2023: 2 pages. 8- "Agir pour une alimentation saine et accessible" *Rev Prescrire* 2023; 43 (482): 933.
