

Scientific Interpretive Summary

Front of Pack Labelling –New Zealand Food Industry Perspectives

Front of pack labelling (FOP) systems, including traffic light systems, may improve health by encouraging consumers to choose healthier foods and by encouraging industry to produce healthier foods. The Health Select Committee in its report “Inquiry into Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes in New Zealand” (August 2007) recommended that a traffic light system or comparable food labelling system be developed.

Considerable work has already been undertaken internationally but it is critical that solid local research underpin any future developments in Australia and New Zealand. The current research was commissioned to identify which FOP scheme would be most likely to result in New Zealand manufacturers developing healthier foods. In depth qualitative interviews were carried out with 15 major food and beverage manufacturing companies with products covering 17 categories of food and beverage, plus one retail chain. The main findings follow.

- Consumer demand is the main influence on what foods are available in New Zealand. Where it is perceived to be required by consumers, manufacturers have adopted various forms of front of pack labelling. The National Heart Foundation (NHF) tick is the most commonly used independent system. The most commonly used industry driven scheme is percent dietary intake (%DI) which provides factual information about the level of certain nutrients in food without making a judgement on the ‘healthiness’ of the food.
- Many manufacturers have internal nutrition guidelines which shape the development of new products. In most cases this work goes on gradually, behind the scenes and is not overtly promoted, since the ‘healthier options’ often do not sell as well. Changes in product formulations to date have been in response to internal policies and external schemes, public discussion and consumer demand.
- Interpretive colour coded schemes such as ‘traffic light’ labels were the least favoured by manufacturers. Such schemes provide a judgement on the ‘healthiness’ of the food based on nutrition criteria.
- Manufacturers in this study disagreed that labelling foods as ‘more healthy’ or ‘less healthy’ would encourage reformulation of ‘less healthy’ foods. They also argue that health is not a major driver for food purchasing.
- Industry provided a number of recommendations for key elements of a FOP scheme if one was to be developed in the future.