

National Liquor News - February 2011

Labelling illogically

The Commonwealth Government's review of food labelling policy was released, and as feared it took a big leap ahead of the research and evidence. The Blewett Review (named after its leader) did not miss an opportunity to propose extra regulations and costs on the industry.

While the Blewett Review was clear in what it wanted on alcohol products, it was less clear in how and why it reached its recommendations. The Review report itself said that the evidence about how labelling works is confused and the impacts are hard to measure. It called for more research to answer those questions. This uncertainty did not play on their minds when it came to alcohol labelling.

Even when it called for warning labels only if the Government was running a broader social marketing and education campaign on the dangers of alcohol, it must have done so knowing that the new National Preventative Health Agency will have the task of doing that type of campaign.

There is another source of expertise about alcohol labelling – Food Standards Australia New Zealand or FSANZ. That organisation had expertly assessed the effectiveness of pregnancy and warning labels on alcohol products. It has a history of looking at all the evidence and weighting up the economic costs and likely benefits using a system that worked well and had the confidence of every party except food and alcohol NGOs. Then, in the middle of 2010, FSANZ quietly announced that its alcohol labelling work was 'on hold' while the Blewett Review was underway. Its conclusions have still not been released. So why no release now that the Review is done? What does its report contain?

The Review's underlying attitude to alcohol was summed up when recommending traffic lights. Traffic light labels show green for low levels, orange for mid levels, and red for high levels, and refer to salt, fats, calories, etc.

The Review recommended labelling on front of packs as a voluntary measure "in the first instance".

But not for alcohol products. The Review knew that alcohol products would have mostly green lights plus maybe an orange one for calories. And that might encourage drinking.