



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - Public distribution

Date: 6/17/2008

GAIN Report Number: GM8029

Germany

Agricultural Situation

Food Labeling

2008

Approved by:

Bobby Richey Jr.
Germany

Prepared by:

Rey Santella

Report Highlights:

Germany continues to discuss nutritional labeling for foods in anticipation of EU action. The German Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Protection conducted a survey that found 55 percent of those surveyed would like a "traffic light" system. Minister of Agriculture Seehofer and the German food industry still oppose this approach.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Annual Report
Berlin [GM1]
[GM]

Agriculture Ministry

In January 2008, the European Commission introduced a proposal to modify the existing food labeling rules in the 27 EU Member States. Under the Commission's proposal, companies would be required to display key nutritional information including fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, and salt content, clearly on the front of food packages. General requirements on how nutritional information should be presented on the package were also presented, however, under the current proposal Member States would have some flexibility to develop their own national schemes, as long as it did not undercut EU regulations.

Prior to the unveiling of the EU labeling proposal, Germany held discussions with industry and consumer groups to determine which food labeling system best addressed its health and nutritional needs. The German Government and food industry supported the concept of nutritional food labeling, although they stressed the need for a voluntary, transparent, and flexible system. Following the round of consultations, German Minister of Agriculture, Horst Seehofer, stated his opposition to any mandatory, color-coded or "traffic light" labeling system.

In April 2008, Dr. Gerd Müller, Parliament State Secretary in the German Agricultural Ministry (BMELV), revealed that the Ministry had conducted a consumer survey to assess the usefulness of the current labeling system and consumers' preferences for a new labeling scheme, including a color coded system. The disclosure caught the food industry, consumer groups, and Parliamentary members by surprise, particularly because Minister Seehofer had consistently opposed the implementation of mandatory, as well as a color-coded, nutritional labeling system.

A BMELV official acknowledged that the Ministry survey did ask consumers if a color-coded labeling system would be useful. Reportedly, 55 percent of the respondents indicated that it would be. Contrary to some press reports, however, BMELV maintained that the survey did not signal its support for the implementation of a mandatory color-coded food labeling system, similar to the "traffic light" approach that is currently in use in the U.K. Dr. Müller later clarified his remarks and stated that the purpose of the survey was simply to see if consumers understood the current nutritional information that was being placed on food packaging and to help legislators implement an easier and more understandable labeling system.

Despite the disclosure of the survey, German Minister of Agriculture Seehofer remained critical of both a mandatory and color based nutritional labeling system according to a speech he delivered to the German Parliament in May. Seehofer argued that such a labeling system may provide consumers misleading information. He contended, for example, that although a product may be labeled with a red color indicating that it contains high fat content, it doesn't consider the possibility that the same product may also contain other essential and healthy nutrients. Seehofer maintained that a product with a red label could still be healthy depending on the ingredients and if it was eaten in moderation. He claimed that physical activities, in addition to a balanced meal, would help consumers live better lives. Seehofer's remarks were part of a BMELV's new national action plan to deal with obesity and an attempt to improve the quality of life for its citizens.

Industry

The German food sector, which is represented by the Federation for Food Law and Food Science (BLL), seemed disappointed to hear about the new survey, particularly since just 7 months ago, the Agricultural Minister joined food industry representatives to denounce the traffic light labeling system and stated that it represented "brainwashing of the people."

In a press release addressing the matter, BLL stated that it remained committed to a voluntary food labeling system. BLL called upon Minister Seehofer to keep his commitment and oppose a mandatory labeling system, which is also being advocated by the European Commission. BLL urged Minister Seehofer to reject the traffic light labeling system, which he denounced just last year.

BLL contends that the plan they developed with the Minister's support adequately addresses consumers' concerns about nutritional information. BLL's plan called upon food companies to voluntarily include nutritional labeling on food products. BLL claims that more than two-thirds of the products on the German market already contain some form of nutritional information. Furthermore, more than 70 percent of the products had links to hotlines and internet sites where additional nutritional information can be found. BLL believed a mandatory labeling system using a traffic light approach will not solve Germany's growing obesity problem. They listed 10 reasons why such a system would not work, which included no scientific justification and the misleading nature of the scheme.

Furthermore, BLL maintains that a more factual labeling system would prove more beneficial for consumers. They recommended that labels focus on four factors: 1) energy; 2) protein; 3) fat; and 4) carbohydrates. BLL contends that this information, in addition to, being more proactive by doing more exercises would help people live more productive and healthier lives.

Other

Consumer and health groups welcomed the news of the survey, but criticized Seehofer's response to the color coded labeling system. They alleged that the Minister is too close to the German food industry, which makes his judgment of the matter less objective.

Outlook

The food labeling debate will continue in Germany. Establishing a harmonized labeling system which provides flexibility will be a challenging task. BMELV has indicated that a timetable for the new labeling system has not been discussed although they maintained that since the labeling proposal is an EU initiative and not a Member State ordinance, the timetable will be dictated by the Commission. The German Government will have an interagency meeting in the near future to determine its position on the matter. EU discussions on this matter are expected to intensify after the summer. BMELV predicted that it would take at least the end of 2009 or early 2010 before a new nutritional labeling system will be implemented.