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European Union Rules Took Effect Sunday to Curb Unverified Green Claims

Companies in Germany and across the bloc now face stricter limits on terms like green and climate neutral.

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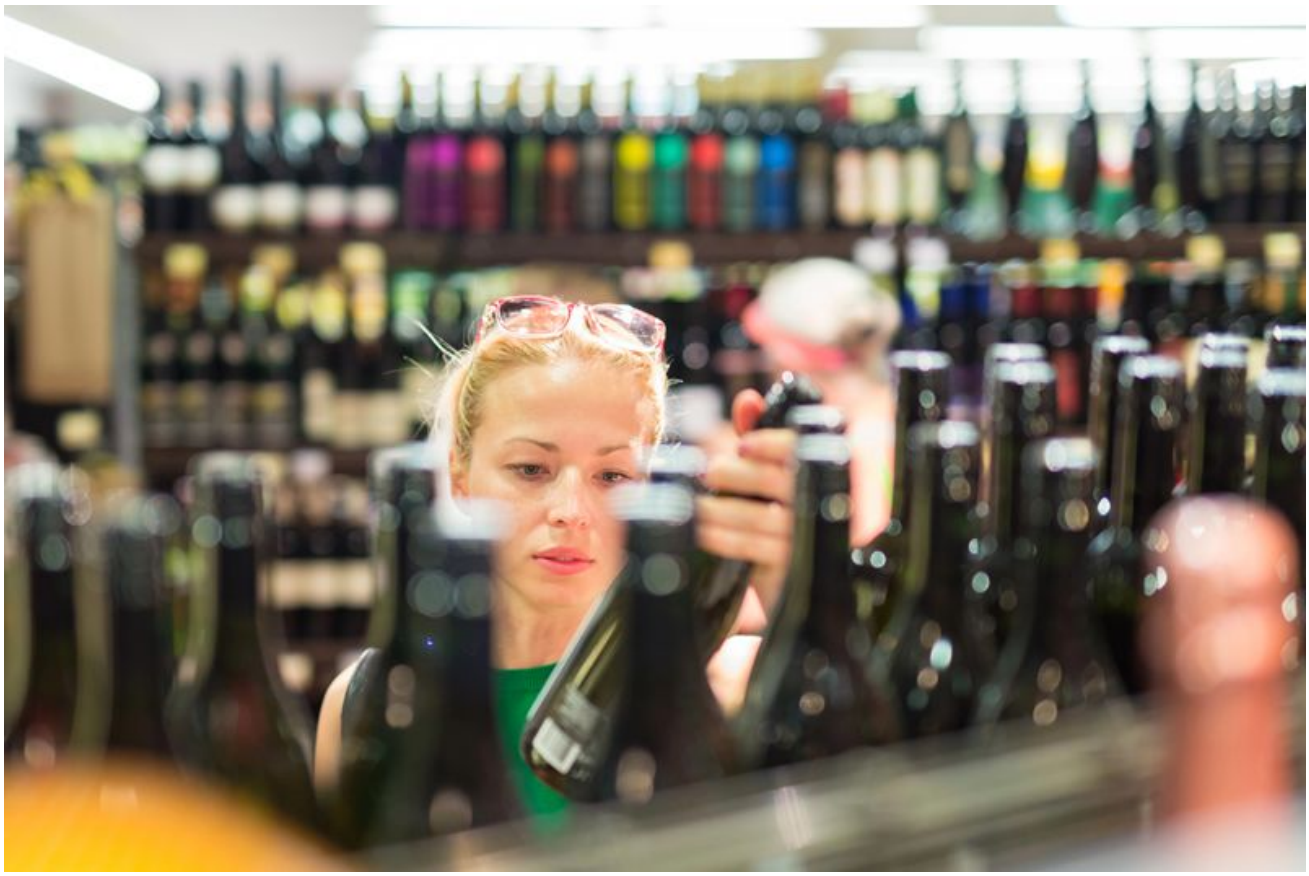

New European Union rules aimed at curbing greenwashing took effect on Sunday, tightening what companies in Germany and across the bloc can say in advertising and on packaging about the environmental qualities of their products.

The rules, known in Brussels as the EmpCo directive, are meant to protect consumers from misleading environmental claims and to give more weight to sustainability statements that can be verified. In practice, the changes are likely to be most visible in supermarkets, drugstores, and online marketing, where broad terms such as “environmentally friendly,” “green,” or similar claims can no longer be used unless companies can clearly justify and prove them.

The directive also narrows the use of the term “climate neutral.” Under the new rules, companies cannot use that claim if it is based on carbon offsetting outside their own value chain, such as paying for tree planting projects. The measure reflects a broader EU effort to stop companies from presenting offset purchases as enough to support sweeping environmental promises.

Another major change concerns labels and seals. Sustainability labels are now allowed only if they are based on an external certification system or issued by a public authority. That is meant to address a market crowded with logos and symbols that can look official to shoppers but may be created by the companies themselves.

Supporters of the new framework say it should help both consumers and businesses that have made real environmental investments. Delara Burkhardt, a German member of the European Parliament from the Social Democrats, said the rules should prevent companies that spend money on environmental protection from having to compete with unsupported promises.

Consumer advocates have also welcomed the tighter standard for labels. Karolina Woytal of the European Consumer Centre said seals can strongly influence buyers, even when many people cannot tell whether a real audit process stands behind them or whether they are mainly a marketing device.

Business groups in Germany say they support the goal of stopping greenwashing but argue that the rollout has created legal uncertainty. Stephan Genth, head of the German Retail Association, said many companies still do not have enough clarity about the exact framework and expectations under the German implementation.

That uncertainty has raised concern over existing inventories. Retail and industry associations warned over the summer that large numbers of products could be affected because their packaging or labels no longer meet the new standard. Genth said the retail association estimates that around 300 million products in Germany could be touched by the change. The groups asked for a 12-month sell-through period to avoid waste.

The concern has not been limited to one industry. In publishing, for example, companies had feared that books carrying claims about sustainable or climate-friendly printing might have to be destroyed if those statements no longer complied with the rules. Similar issues apply anywhere companies have already printed labels, boxes, or promotional material.

Germany’s Federal Environment Ministry has pushed back on complaints that businesses were caught off guard. The ministry noted that the EU directive entered into force in March 2024 and said the details of the changes have been clear since then. Woytal made a similar point, saying companies that now describe the rules as a surprise failed to monitor the market properly.

One of the most immediate questions in Germany has been what happens to goods that were already circulating before the new rules began to apply. Three days before the start date, the Bundestag approved a temporary special provision for products placed on the market before Sept. 27. If disputes reach court, judges are expected to consider proportionality, including whether companies would otherwise have to discard large numbers of otherwise usable products.

Even with that late adjustment, some companies say the damage is already done. Philip Siefer, co-founder of the Berlin company Einhorn, said the directive created major costs for his business. The company, which makes period products and condoms and won a German sustainability prize last year, had about two million tampons in packaging that included the word “fair.” It also used a self-created symbol, “fairstainable,” combining the words “fair” and “sustainable.” Because that symbol was not externally certified, it created problems under the new framework.

Siefer said the company tried to sell the products before Sunday through steep online discounts. He also said it shipped goods by air freight, despite its own sustainability goals, and faced added storage costs. He put the total hit to the company in the mid-six figures in euros.

The new rules come as courts and regulators in Europe are paying closer attention to environmental marketing. In Germany, a regional court in Frankfurt ruled last year that Apple could no longer advertise a smartwatch as carbon neutral in a case brought by the environmental group Deutsche Umwelthilfe. The decision did not arise from the new directive itself, but it showed the growing legal risk around environmental language that cannot be fully supported.

Enforcement in Germany may now depend heavily on litigation. There is no single central authority responsible for monitoring compliance with the directive nationwide, and environmental organizations are expected to bring cases against companies they believe are violating the new limits.

The changes could carry direct implications for beverage makers as well, even if the debate so far has focused more on retail packaging in general. Wine, beer, spirits, and other drinks companies often rely on labels, bottle messaging, cartons, and advertising to highlight sustainability efforts. The tighter EU standard leaves less room for broad environmental language and may increase the risk of legal challenges if claims about production, packaging, carbon impact, or sourcing are not backed by clear evidence or recognized certification.

For consumers, the effect is likely to be gradual rather than immediate. Products already on shelves will not disappear overnight, and some disputes will likely be settled in court. But from now on, companies selling into Germany and the wider EU face a stricter test when they tell shoppers that a product is green, sustainable, or climate friendly.