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New EU anti-greenwashing law forces wine producers to justify environmental claims

The rules now cover labels, packaging, websites and advertising, with penalties reaching 4% of annual turnover in cross-border cases

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Wine producers that sell in the European Union are facing tighter limits on how they describe the environmental qualities of their products after a new anti-greenwashing law began to apply on September 27, forcing wineries and importers to recheck labels,

packaging, websites and other consumer messaging.

The measure, Directive (EU) 2024/825, is meant to curb vague or misleading environmental claims across all consumer goods sold in the bloc. For wine, that puts common language such as “green,” “eco-friendly,” “sustainable,” and, in some cases, “natural” under closer scrutiny unless producers can explain exactly what those words mean and support them with evidence.

The rule, known as Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition, was introduced in 2024 as an amendment to the EU’s Unfair Commercial Practices Directive and Consumer Rights Directive. It does not require wineries to change how they farm or make wine. Instead, it focuses on what companies say to consumers and whether those statements are clear, specific and verifiable.

That distinction is likely to matter across the drinks business. Wineries that sell into the EU may now need to review not only bottle labels but also back-label text, shelf materials, online product descriptions and broader sustainability marketing to reduce the risk of noncompliance, disputes and relabeling costs. Similar issues could affect other beverage companies that use broad environmental language in the European market.

Industry advisers say many producers are still catching up. Peter Stanbury, research director of the Sustainable Wine Roundtable, said awareness remains limited and that many in the trade still do not fully understand what the directive means for their businesses.

Under the new framework, prohibited practices include generic environmental claims that are not explained, irrelevant claims and sustainability seals or badges that are not backed by an approved certification scheme. A 2020 study estimated that more than 50% of environmental claims in the EU were vague, misleading or unfounded, a figure that helped drive tighter regulation.

Ignacio Sánchez Recarte, secretary general of the European Committee of Wine Companies, said the main task for producers is to review marketing and labeling rather than production. He said operators will need to make sure environmental claims are

clear, specific and properly substantiated.

One practical problem is existing inventory. Michael R. Littenberg, who leads environmental, social and governance work at the law firm Ropes & Gray, said old stock is not grandfathered under the new rules. That means bottles already in circulation may need stickers or additional point-of-sale information if current wording no longer meets the standard.

How the law is enforced will vary by country because EU directives set the objective but leave each member state to decide how to implement the rules and penalties. That could create a patchwork system in which enforcement differs from one national market to another. In cases involving widespread violations across several EU countries, companies could face penalties of as much as 4% of annual turnover.

For wine companies, the reach of the directive goes beyond the printed label. Lawyers and trade groups say it can also apply to other consumer-facing communications, including advertising, websites and promotional materials. That raises the stakes for producers whose sustainability messaging is spread across multiple channels, not just the bottle.

The Swedish alcohol retailer Systembolaget, which reviews a wide range of wine sold in Sweden’s state-run retail system, said the principles behind the directive are consistent with how it has assessed sustainability claims and certifications for years. Emma Östansjö, a sustainability specialist at Systembolaget, said the retailer uses a dedicated review function to check whether claims comply with relevant law and avoid misleading consumers.

In practice, the law does not ban environmental communication outright. It requires proof. Producers can still make specific claims if they can document them. That may include third-party certifications, verifiable farming or production practices such as hand-harvesting or dry-farming, or measurable statements such as a documented reduction in carbon footprint since a stated year.

A European Commission questions-and-answers document released in September said certification schemes used for sustainability labels must rely on independent third-party verification, have publicly available requirements and allow the use of a corresponding label. But certification is not mandatory for every environmental statement. Sánchez Recarte said some claims can still be supported through other appropriate evidence and substantiation.

That distinction is important for the wine industry because most EU producers are small or medium-sized businesses. Sánchez Recarte said more than 99% of wine producers in the EU fall into that category, making broad new certification requirements especially burdensome for smaller operators.

Some of the sharpest questions concern terms that have become common in parts of the wine trade but still lack settled legal definitions. “Natural” and “low intervention” are among the most sensitive because they may refer to farming methods, cellar practices or both. The Commission has said that if the word “natural” is used in a brand or product name in a way likely to create an environmental association for the average consumer, it may count as an environmental claim. In that case, the producer would need to explain what the term means and be able to prove it if challenged.

That issue is already dividing the sector. Sánchez Recarte has argued that “natural” is misleading and does not fit the EU legal framework. Some producers disagree. Arnold Holzer, a winemaker in Austria, said he believes the name of his wine, Natural Orange, accurately describes the product and complies with Austrian law. Others in the natural wine movement say they prefer transparency about ingredients and methods over a disputed category label.

Fabio Bartolomei of Spain’s Vinos Ambiz has taken that approach by listing fermented grape juice as the only ingredient and identifying additives that are not used, instead of marketing the wines with the term “natural.” Lorenzo Valenzuela of Spain’s Barranco Oscuro has defended the idea of natural wine as wine made from pure juice fermented on its own, though those words do not appear on his labels.

The debate is unfolding as wine labels in the EU are already carrying more mandatory information than before, including ingredients and nutrition details, often through QR codes. Some producers and researchers see the new anti-greenwashing rules as pushing the sector toward the same direction: more precise disclosures and fewer broad claims.

Outside Europe, the directive is also drawing attention from exporters. U.S. wine producers may see similarities with the Federal Trade Commission’s Green Guides, which outline how companies should make environmental marketing claims. But Littenberg said the comparison only goes so far. The U.S. guides are not binding rules in the same way, even though violating them can still trigger scrutiny, and compliance in the United States does not shield a producer from EU requirements.

For American wineries and other beverage exporters, that means claims acceptable at home may still need to be rewritten or more heavily documented before products enter Europe. Some U.S.-based sustainability programs have welcomed that direction. Napa Green, a California certification group, said it supports efforts to reduce consumer confusion around sustainability claims.

Not everyone is convinced the new regime will work smoothly. Stanbury said one concern is that the directive could increase pressure for more certifications without fully settling which ones are credible. He said the industry has already seen the rise of weak or vanity certifications, even as more rigorous programs try to raise standards. Too low a bar risks making labels meaningless, while too high a bar can discourage smaller producers from participating.

Littenberg said some companies in food and beverage had been preparing for the September 27 start date for months by adjusting campaigns, labels and packaging, but smaller businesses were still playing catch-up. That timing gap could leave many producers exposed just as national enforcement systems begin to take shape across the bloc.