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Alcohol Action Ireland says industry report seeks to derail Irish warning labels

The group said shifting the fight to Brussels could freeze a delayed law requiring cancer and liver disease warnings on bottles and cans

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Alcohol Action Ireland sharply criticized an industry-backed economic report on Tuesday, November 10, saying the study is being used to reopen a fight over Ireland's planned health warning labels for alcohol and to push the issue to the European Union,

where the group argues the measure could stall indefinitely.

The dispute centers on a recently published report by Indecon for Drinks Ireland, the Ibec group representing alcohol producers. According to Alcohol Action Ireland, the report highlighted the sector's tax contribution, including €1.2 billion in excise duties and €1.4 billion in value-added tax, but urged that alcohol labeling be addressed at EU level rather than through Ireland's national law.

Alcohol Action Ireland, an independent advocacy group focused on reducing alcohol harm, said that approach would undermine Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act, which requires mandatory health information on alcohol products sold in the country. The labels were due to take effect on May 22 but were delayed until September 2028 after lobbying from the alcohol industry, according to the group.

In a statement, Alcohol Action Ireland Chief Executive Sheila Gilheany said the industry-funded report failed to weigh the wider public cost of alcohol. She cited World Health Organization estimates that alcohol-related harm can amount to as much as 2.5% of gross domestic product, which she said would be about €15 billion in Ireland when health care, social care, lost workplace productivity and justice system costs are included.

Gilheany also said those figures do not capture other harms, including the impact on families and the costs associated with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition linked to prenatal alcohol exposure. She said Ireland has the world's third-highest level of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and that it may affect up to 7.4% of the population.

The core policy dispute is over whether Ireland should keep moving ahead with its own warning-label law or wait for a common European framework. Alcohol Action Ireland argues that sending the matter to Brussels would, in practice, delay or kill the Irish rules because the EU has no harmonized legislation requiring health warnings on alcohol and because the industry has long opposed stricter labeling.

Gilheany said the report’s recommendation to address labeling at European level amounted to “the opening salvo” in a fresh attempt to derail the Irish law. She argued that alcohol producers are trying to move the debate to a forum where agreement is harder to reach and where past public health efforts have been weakened by lobbying.

The group pointed to the EU’s Beating Cancer Plan, launched in 2021, as an example of a public health initiative that, in its view, was diluted under industry pressure. Alcohol Action Ireland said that history makes it especially wary of any effort to shift decision-making away from Irish law and into a wider EU negotiation.

The issue matters beyond public health policy because it could shape labeling and compliance costs for wine, beer and spirits producers that sell into Ireland, while also influencing a broader debate over whether alcohol health warnings should be harmonized across the EU or left to national governments. For drinks companies, the outcome could affect packaging decisions, export requirements and the possibility that different member states adopt different rules.

Alcohol Action Ireland also raised concern about comments it said were attributed to Irish Agriculture Minister Martin Heydon by his Italian counterpart, Francesco Lollobrigida, suggesting Ireland had already decided to move the labeling issue to Europe. The group said any such shift would amount to a serious retreat from a law already passed by the Irish parliament.

Ireland’s labeling rules have drawn international attention because they would require bottles and cans to carry health information that includes warnings about the link between alcohol and liver disease and fatal cancers. Supporters say the labels would give consumers clear information at the point of purchase. Industry groups have argued that any such requirements should be consistent across the EU single market.

Alcohol Action Ireland said that even before the law was due to take effect, some health warning labels had started appearing on alcohol products in Irish shops as producers prepared for compliance. It cited a recent study on early exposure to the labels that found two in five people who saw them said the information made them think about alcohol’s effect on health, while one in four said they decided to buy less alcohol or no alcohol on that shopping trip.

The group used those findings to argue that labeling can change consumer behavior and that this is one reason the industry is resisting it. Gilheany said leading producers have described health information labeling as a risk to profits and said the industry was likely to use the Indecon and Drinks Ireland report in its contacts with government as the September 2028 deadline approaches.

The latest exchange leaves the Irish government facing continued pressure from both public health advocates and the drinks industry over a measure that has already been delayed once. The law remains on the books, but the fight over whether Ireland will implement its own warning labels or seek an EU-wide solution appears far from settled.