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Nine Wine Nations Endorse Stellenbosch Principles to Limit Sustainability Trade Barriers

The voluntary framework urges science-based rules, acceptance of digital labels and lower compliance costs for exporters and importers

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Governments from nine wine-producing countries endorsed a new set of voluntary principles on Nov. 2 in Stellenbosch, South Africa, to try to prevent sustainability policies from becoming trade barriers for the wine industry or creating unnecessary

compliance costs for producers and importers.

The agreement was reached during the annual meeting of the World Wine Trade Group, or WWTG, which South Africa hosted in Stellenbosch from Nov. 1 to Nov. 4. The group brings together government and industry representatives from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Georgia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Uruguay. Founded in 1998, the WWTG works to ease international wine trade through information sharing, discussions on regulation and joint efforts to remove barriers.

The principles adopted on Nov. 2 are known as the Stellenbosch Principles. According to the WWTG, they are voluntary and non-binding, and are meant to guide governments as they design environmental and sustainability measures that affect wine production and trade. The stated goal is to support more sustainable winegrowing while avoiding unjustified restrictions on trade or unintended market distortions.

The move comes as wine producers face growing pressure from governments and buyers to meet environmental requirements on farming, production, packaging and disclosure. For the beverage sector, and especially for wine exporters, the principles could become an important reference point because they set out a common position on certification, digital labeling and environmental compliance rules that may affect access to foreign markets and the cost of doing business across borders.

Under the first principle, governments are urged to avoid one-size-fits-all rules and excessive compliance costs when introducing sustainability measures. The document says authorities should recognize that wine is produced under different agricultural, climatic and environmental conditions, and that there can be more than one way to reach the same policy outcome. It calls for compliance systems based on performance rather than forcing producers to follow a single prescribed growing or production method.

The same section also encourages governments to give positive consideration to approaches used in other countries, even when those approaches differ from their own, as long as they still meet policy objectives. It says authorities should rely on international standards, guides and recommendations where those exist, unless they are ineffective or inappropriate for the objective being pursued. The principles also call

on governments to avoid unnecessary burdens on producers and importers, consider supplier declarations of conformity, and accept private-sector certification schemes when third-party certification is required. They also say governments should consider non-government third-party conformity assessment options and limit reporting or due diligence demands to information that is strictly necessary to assess compliance.

One of the more practical points in the document concerns labels. The principles say governments should consider the use of digital labels for sustainability-related information, including details on packaging disposal, reuse and recycling. That could matter for exporters trying to meet different national requirements without redesigning bottles and labels for every market.

A second principle says sustainability measures should be based on science and risk. The WWTG says governments should use the best available scientific evidence, assess the risk of non-compliance, and explore opportunities to accept new and innovative technologies that can both support trade and reduce the environmental impact of wine production. It also says authorities should raise public awareness of scientific information on the role that new winegrowing technologies can play in lowering environmental harm.

A third principle focuses on transparency and stakeholder participation. The document calls on governments to notify proposed measures under the World Trade Organization Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, promote public participation in regulatory development, and work with trading partners and other stakeholders through technical cooperation and information sharing.

It also says that, except in urgent cases, governments should provide a reasonable period of no less than six months between publishing a new measure and bringing it into force. The WWTG said that transition period should give grape growers and wine producers in exporting countries time to adapt their practices, taking into account different growing seasons and the need to protect wine that has already been produced before new rules take effect.