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Congress scrutinizes Biden-era influence on 2025 dietary guidelines amid alcohol policy dispute

Lawmakers demand transparency from health agencies as conflicting expert panels spark debate over future federal alcohol recommendations

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The process for updating the 2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans has become a point of contention in Washington, as Congress continues to push back against the influence of committees established during Joe Biden’s presidency. Although Biden is no longer in office, his administration’s appointees and their approach to alcohol guidelines remain at the center of a heated debate. The issue came to a head this week when Representative James Comer (R-Ky), chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, sent a formal letter to Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), demanding transparency and compliance with congressional oversight.

The controversy centers on how the federal government will advise Americans about alcohol consumption in its next set of dietary guidelines, due by the end of 2025. Traditionally, these guidelines are updated every five years and have significant

implications for public health messaging, industry regulation, and even economic activity in sectors like hospitality and beverage production.

Congressional law requires that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) provide scientific guidance on alcohol for these guidelines. NASEM assembled a panel of 14 experts from fields such as nutrition, public health, psychiatry, epidemiology, and emergency medicine. Their findings were reviewed by an additional group of 10 specialists before publication. The NASEM report concluded that while excessive drinking is dangerous, moderate alcohol consumption may reduce overall mortality risk.

However, during Biden's tenure, the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD) quietly formed its own six-person committee to draft a separate report on alcohol. This panel included three addiction specialists, an epidemiologist from Columbia University, an anesthesiologist from Mayo Clinic, and another scientist affiliated with an advocacy group focused on reducing alcohol use among young women. Critics argue that this group lacked the breadth of expertise found in the NASEM panel.

The ICCPUD report diverged sharply from NASEM's conclusions, stating that any level of alcohol consumption is harmful—a position more closely aligned with Biden's personal views as a teetotaler. According to congressional critics like Comer, this approach not only contradicts established scientific consensus but also bypasses legal requirements that mandate reliance on NASEM's findings.

Comer's letter accuses HHS and USDA officials of stonewalling congressional requests for information about how the ICCPUD committee was formed and how its recommendations are being incorporated into the official guidelines. He notes that previous requests under Biden's administration yielded only publicly available documents and that subpoenas for additional records were ignored until time ran out.

The stakes extend beyond public health policy. Industry groups representing restaurants, bars, wineries, breweries, and distilleries warn that stricter federal guidance against moderate drinking could have far-reaching economic consequences. They point to historical precedents such as the end of Prohibition under Franklin D.

Roosevelt as evidence that alcohol policy can influence employment and consumer spending.

Comer has now requested a staff briefing from HHS on the status of the alcohol guidelines and demanded delivery of all internal documents related to the formation and activities of the ICCPUD subcommittee by May 12. He also asked for drafts of any language referencing alcohol in the upcoming dietary guidelines and a full list of staff involved in drafting those recommendations.

As Congress awaits a response from HHS under new leadership, questions remain about whether Biden-era processes will continue to shape federal dietary advice or if lawmakers will succeed in reasserting their oversight authority. The outcome could affect not only how Americans think about drinking but also how businesses across the country operate in relation to federal health policy.