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European Parliament Committee Presses for Mandatory Health Warnings on Alcohol Labels

Draft report urges swift legislative action as cancer rates climb and prevention efforts stall across the European Union

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The debate over health warnings on alcoholic beverage labels has returned to the center of European policy discussions following the release of a draft report by the European Parliament’s Committee on Public Health. The document, published in late March, is part of the ongoing review of Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan (BECA), a

comprehensive framework launched in 2021 to address cancer prevention, detection, treatment, and survivorship across the European Union.

The draft report urges the European Commission to move forward “without further delay” on legislative proposals that would require mandatory health warnings on alcohol labels. This recommendation comes after previous delays, including Ireland’s decision to postpone its own labeling regulations from 2026 to 2028. The issue had appeared settled for some time but has resurfaced amid growing concerns about cancer rates and the role of alcohol as a risk factor.

Cancer remains a leading cause of death in Europe. In 2022, 2.7 million Europeans were diagnosed with cancer and 1.3 million died from the disease. Projections indicate that by 2040, new cancer cases will rise by 18% and deaths by 26%. The economic impact is also significant, with annual costs exceeding €100 billion and member states losing the equivalent of 1.1 million full-time workers each year.

The report highlights that prevention is the most cost-effective strategy for cancer control. It notes that 40% of cancer cases could be prevented by addressing risk factors such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption, obesity, environmental pollution, and exposure to hazardous substances. Specifically, it states that tobacco causes 27% of all cancers and that three out of ten alcohol-attributable deaths are due to cancer.

Despite these statistics, progress on implementing mandatory health warnings for alcoholic beverages has been slow. The Commission had promised action by 2023 but has yet to deliver concrete proposals. The draft report expresses regret over this delay and calls for immediate legislative action.

The wine and spirits industry in Europe has expressed concern about these developments. Producers argue that mandatory health warnings could unfairly penalize a sector that is economically important and culturally significant in many EU countries. They point out that similar debates have taken place before, particularly during Ireland’s push for stricter labeling laws, which faced strong opposition from several member states and industry groups.

The BECA plan itself is broad in scope, with €4 billion allocated across prevention (49.4%), screening (24.9%), treatment (13.9%), quality of life (6.8%), and reducing inequalities (4.6%). More than 90% of planned actions are either completed or ongoing, according to the report. However, it also notes that most funding is directed toward research rather than direct clinical implementation or public health interventions.

Disparities in cancer incidence, detection, treatment, and survival persist across EU member states. For example, breast cancer screening rates vary widely—from below 10% to above 90%—and survival rates for certain cancers differ by as much as 20% between countries. The report calls for targeted interventions to address these inequalities and improve access to care for disadvantaged groups.

The draft also addresses other preventive measures beyond alcohol labeling. It calls for accelerated work on front-of-pack nutrition labeling and strategies to reduce consumption of high-fat and ultra-processed foods, especially among young people. Vaccination campaigns against human papillomavirus (HPV) and hepatitis B are highlighted as important tools for preventing certain types of cancer.

A key theme throughout the report is the need for better monitoring and evaluation of outcomes rather than simply tracking whether actions have been launched. The European Court of Auditors recently criticized the lack of coherent outcome indicators in the BECA plan’s implementation.

The next steps will depend on how the European Commission responds to these recommendations and whether it moves forward with legislative proposals on alcohol labeling. The issue remains contentious within both political circles and affected industries.

For now, the renewed focus on health warnings signals that the debate over alcohol’s role in public health—and its regulation—remains unresolved at the highest levels of European policymaking. As cancer rates continue to rise and prevention becomes an even greater priority, measures such as mandatory labeling are likely to remain under consideration despite resistance from some sectors of the economy.