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July 6, 2021

Lauren K. Roth  
Acting Principal Associate Commissioner for Policy  
Food and Drug Administration  
5630 Fishers Lane, Rm. 1061  
Rockville, MD 20852

**RE: Comment Request on Quantitative Research on a Voluntary Symbol Depicting the Nutrient Content Claim “Healthy” on Packaged Foods; Docket ID FDA-2021-N-0336-0001**

Dear Ms. Roth:

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)’s quantitative research efforts regarding the voluntary symbol depicting the nutrient content claim “healthy” on packaged foods. AICR is the leading authority on the links between diet, weight and physical activity, and cancer prevention and survival. After not smoking, the leading cancer risk factors are poor diet, excess weight, and physical inactivity [1]. AICR supports federal policies, such as nutrition labels and claims, that make it easier to identify healthy food and beverage options. These initiatives support consumers in making cancer-protective choices for themselves and their families.

AICR supports FDA moving forward with consumer research on front-of-package-label (FOPL) systems that will help consumers identify and select healthy options. Depending on its implementation, an effective FOPL system can also incentivize industry to reformulate products or revise their product portfolio to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages in the marketplace. To this end, we urge the agency to expand its examination of FOPL systems beyond a “healthy” symbol to test multiple FOPL systems within and across product categories. Testing multiple label systems with various designs, placements, and sizes is paramount to find the most effective label for increasing the selection of more nutritious choices, decreasing selection of less nutritious choices, and improving the overall nutritional quality of foods and beverages in the marketplace.

AICR’s sister organization, the World Cancer Research Fund International (WCRF), has reviewed global evidence on the effectiveness of FOPL systems in improving understanding or identification of healthier choices and healthier purchasing behavior. WCRF’s review of the evidence base on countries around the world that adopted FOPL schemes has found that the most effective FOPL systems share several characteristics [2,3]. This research has found that the most effective FOPL schemes are:

- Mandatory;
- Interpretive;
- Designed through extensive consumer testing of label characteristics in context;
- Launched alongside extensive communications campaigns; and
- Supported by monitoring and evaluation plans.

We elaborate on these findings in the remainder of our comment letter. We hope that FDA will consider the findings of this global evidence review and lessons learned as the agency crafts a FOPL system that is effective in improving diet quality and fits the dynamics of the U.S. market.

Mandatory labels may be more effective in changing purchasing behavior because voluntary systems often have a low uptake, especially amongst food and beverage companies whose products score low [3]. This is the case in France, where major companies whose products would receive low classification

through Nutri-Score are lagging in adoption of the voluntary label [4]. In contrast, the Chilean warning labels have effectively incentivized companies to reformulate products, likely due to its mandatory nature, in combination with the associated enforcement mechanisms [5]. Under voluntary schemes, companies have less incentive to reformulate their products, as products that have the least favorable rating do not need to have a label at all. This is the case in Australia and New Zealand, where incentives to use a FOPL are weak and companies' interests are not well aligned with voluntary FOPL [6]. A recent five-year review recommended setting targets to stimulate uptake, with the potential to mandate use of the label if targets are not met [7].

Evidence suggests that, given relatively low levels of consumer nutrition knowledge and health literacy, interpretive FOPL systems are more effective than reductive systems alone [8,9]. Interpretive label systems provide nutrition information as a recommendation or guidance, while reductive labels provide information with no specific opinion, recommendation, or guidance [8]. Reductive labels that do not provide context regarding the nutrient concentration and general healthfulness of products are less impactful on consumer understanding and purchasing behavior than their interpretive FOPL counterparts. Similarly, interpretative labels can also have a greater impact than reductive labels on influencing product reformulation toward a more healthful standard.

The evidence from around the world on developing FOPL schemes also highlights the importance of conducting extensive consumer testing of proposed labels to gauge the impact of the color, shape, size, and placement of multiple potential labels on individuals' knowledge and intention to change purchasing behavior. Existing research suggests that most FOPL systems have been found to enable consumers to select the healthier option when compared with no FOPL system [10]. Simpler, interpretative labels are easiest for consumers to understand and use [12]. Research from Uruguay has found that black labels are most associated with unhealthfulness, but red in combination with an octagonal shape works as an effective warning (resembling the 'stop' sign) [11]. These conclusions should be tested in various subpopulations in the U.S. market as they will be influenced by cultural context and other factors. For example, it is important to test whether the FOPL system performs well among people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and in areas with reduced nutrition access, commonly known as "food deserts."

Research from around the world also suggests that implementation of a label is more successful when accompanied by awareness and communication campaigns as an integral part of the implementation plans. This is because there is emerging evidence that effectiveness of FOPL models on purchases of healthier products are influenced by public awareness of the FOPL scheme [12].

International experience has also shown the importance of a monitoring and evaluation framework during and beyond the policy design phase of the new FOPL system. This plan will be useful in assessing the effects of the label and monitoring compliance, as well as any unintended consequences [3]. For example, it is important to gauge whether the scheme is effective among vulnerable groups whose diets are more likely to consist of high levels of unhealthful products.

With a reinvigorated public interest in nutrition, and strong evidence on the impact of diet and lifestyle on risk for chronic diseases such as cancer, the present moment offers an invaluable opportunity to examine the effectiveness of FOPL systems. We urge the Agency to fully review the evidence in evaluating the efficacy of various labeling systems, including lessons learned from the international experience, and to establish a FOPL system that serves to inform consumers and empower them with information to make sound decisions for the health of themselves and their families.

If you have any questions about our comments or we can provide any additional information, please contact AICR's Public Policy Consultant, Melissa Maitin-Shepard, MPP, at [MMSHealthStrategies@gmail.com](mailto:MMSHealthStrategies@gmail.com).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Deirdre McGinley-Gieser  
Executive Vice President  
American Institute for Cancer Research

## References

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