

April 18, 2018

Dear Members of Congress:

The undersigned academic experts write to strongly object to the misuse of the negotiations over the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) to undermine public health and labeling transparency initiatives on food and beverages being undertaken here and around the world.

According to an article in the New York Times on March 20, 2018, the U.S. Trade Representative is working to weaken our ability—in addition to Canada and Mexico’s—to educate citizens about the content of unhealthy food and beverages. On March 21, 2018, Ambassador Robert Lighthizer testified at a House Ways and Means Committee hearing, confirming that such a measure is being proposed.

Such a proposal is emblematic of the abuse of trade agreement negotiations to undermine non-discriminatory consumer protections and harm public health. Consumers have a right to know what is in their food. Empowering people with clear, easy-to-understand information can help them make more informed dietary decisions, which is critical because poor nutrition causes 680,000 deaths in the U.S. a year from diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses and contributes to high health care costs.

The World Health Organization reports that the global prevalence of obesity nearly tripled between 1975 and 2016. In the United States, the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show the prevalence of obesity at an all-time high; rates have doubled among adults and more than tripled among children since 1980. In response to the global obesity epidemic, countries around the world are ensuring greater transparency to better inform their citizens. One important advance has been front-of-package labeling, which are currently being developed in Canada and would be directly threatened by the Nafta proposal from the U.S.

Examples of successful programs abroad include Chile’s successful front-of-package nutrition labeling that effectively informs consumers about unhealthy foods and has spurred companies to improve their products (reducing salt, added sugars, and saturated fat). Chile’s health minister, Carmen Castillo, indicated that about a quarter of processed foods sold in Chile have been reformulated. Data from Chile also indicate that over 90 percent of the public report that the labels help them make informed decisions. Israel’s program takes effect in two years, while Ecuador’s labels are already on packages. Ecuador’s health minister Margarita Guevara indicated the program triggered some 40 percent of manufacturers to improve the nutritional value of foods.

At the March 21, 2018 hearing, Ambassador Lighthizer stated, “I’d like to put my office on the record as being against obesity.” The actions by U.S. negotiators in this regard will speak far louder than mere statements.

We urge you to oppose any language in Nafta that would restrict labeling on food and beverages and harm public health, transparency, and the ability of consumers to make informed food decisions for themselves and their families. Nafta should not be used to restrict our own and other member-countries' ability to protect the health of its citizens.

Sincerely,

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