April 18, 2018

The Honorable Robert E. Lighthizer
Ambassador
United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Ambassador Lighthizer:

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 back your statements about obesity with concrete steps and to withdraw the proposal to limit the ability of member-countries to develop labeling systems for foods and beverages.

Sincerely,

Lawrence J. Appel, MD, MPH  
Professor of Medicine  
Johns Hopkins University

Alberto Ascherio, MD, DrPH  
Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology  
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Henry Blackburn, MD  
Professor Emeritus  
School of Public Health  
University of Minnesota

Kathryn Braun, DrPH, MPH  
Professor of Public Health  
University of Hawaii

Carlos A. Camargo, MD, DrPH, MPH  
Professor of Medicine  
Harvard Medical School

Michael Carey, PhD, MA  
Director and Professor  
Centers for Behavioral and Preventive Medicine  
Brown University

David E. Corbin, PhD  
Emeritus professor, Health Education and Public Health  
Department of Health and Kinesiology  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

David Cutler, PhD  
Professor of Economics  
Harvard University

Barbara Ferrer, PhD, MPH, MEd  
Director of Public Health  
County of Los Angeles

Maxine Hayes, MD, MPH  
Clinical Professor  
Schools of Medicine and Public Health  
University of Washington

Linda Houtkooper, PhD, RDN, FACSM  
Professor Nutritional Sciences  
University of Arizona

Frank Hu, MD, PhD  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Nutrition  
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Lindsay Jaacks, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Global Health  
Department of Global Health and Population  
Harvard University

David A. Kenny, PhD  
Emeritus Distinguished Board of Trustees and Alumni Professor  
Department of Psychology  
University of Connecticut

James Krieger, MD, MPH  
Clinical Professor  
Department of Medicine and Health Services  
University of Washington

Dawn Larsen, PhD  
Professor  
Department of Health Science  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Adam Lawson, PhD  
Professor  
Department of Psychology  
Eastern Kentucky University
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Kristina H. Lewis, MD, MPH, SM</strong></th>
<th><strong>Michele Polascek, PhD, MHS</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<td>Division of Public Health Sciences</td>
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<td>Wake Forest School of Medicine</td>
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<th><strong>Jennifer Pomeranz, JD, MPH</strong></th>
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<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>School of Public Health</td>
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<td>New York University</td>
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<th><strong>Bill Reger-Nash, EdD</strong></th>
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<td>Department of Nutrition</td>
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<td>Adjunct Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Health Policy and Management</td>
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<td>Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, Emerita</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td>New York University</td>
<td>Department of Pediatrics</td>
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<td><strong>Marian Neuhouser, PhD, RD</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dean Schillinger, MD</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Head, Cancer Prevention</td>
<td>Professor of Medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center</td>
<td>Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affiliate Professor</td>
<td>University of California, San Francisco</td>
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<td>University of Washington, School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology</td>
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<th><strong>Laura A. Schmidt, PhD, MSW, MPH</strong></th>
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<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health</td>
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<td>University of California, San Francisco</td>
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<th><strong>Susan Schneider, JD, LLM</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>William H. Enfield Professor of Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Human Nutrition and Food</td>
<td>University of Arkansas School of Law</td>
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<th><strong>Anna Maria Siega-Riz, PhD</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Professor and Associate Dean for Research</td>
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<td>Department of Pediatrics</td>
<td>School of Nursing</td>
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<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
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Anastasia Snelling, PhD, MS  
Professor  
Department of Health Studies  
American University

Alfred Sommer, MD, MHS  
Dean Emeritus and University Distinguished Service Professor  
Department of Epidemiology, Ophthalmology, International Health  
Johns Hopkins University

Meir Stampfer, MD, DrPH  
Professor  
Department of Epidemiology and Nutrition  
Harvard University

Mary Story, PhD, RD  
Professor  
Department of Community and Family Medicine  
Duke University Global Health Institute

Vic Strasburger, MD  
Distinguished Professor Emeritus  
Department of Pediatrics  
University of New Mexico School of Medicine

Stuart Sweet, MD, PhD  
Professor  
Department of Pediatrics  
Washington University

Walter Willett, MD, DrPH  
Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition  
Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Health

John Worobey, PhD  
Professor  
Department of Nutritional Sciences  
Rutgers University

Lisa Young, PhD, RD, CDN  
Adjunct Professor of Nutrition  
New York University

*The title and institution affiliation are for identification purposes only.*