

Decent Proposals

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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In past articles I've written about both my son's and my wife's severe food allergies. That's why I was so happy when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration required food manufacturers to clearly label the presence of common high-risk food allergens in their products.

The U.S. Treasury Department is now considering beefing up the labeling requirements for alcoholic beverages. The Treasury published a new rule last week for public comment requiring all alcoholic beverages to have labels including the drink's percentage of alcohol by volume and a "serving facts" panel identifying the amount of calories, carbohydrates, fat and protein for a standard serving size. The labels could also disclose the amount of pure alcohol, or ethyl alcohol, per serving.

Today companies are only required to include the percentage of alcohol by volume on liquor and wine labels, and only on beer labels in those few states that require it. If a brewer desires to have its beer be classified as a "light" beer, however, the label must show the percentage of alcohol by volume and the number of calories.

The Treasury is gathering comments on the proposed rule through October 29, at which time it will then review the comments to determine whether to make the rule official. If so, the new labels would not become mandatory until three years after the final rule is published.

While the Food and Drug Administration regulates information labels on groceries and medications, the Treasury Department's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau has jurisdiction over alcoholic-beverage labeling.

Not wanting its label-making thunder to be stolen, however, the FDA also recently published proposed rules for sunscreens. The rules cover the ingredients, labeling and testing of sunscreens that claim to protect against both the sun's ultraviolet B rays, which cause sunburn, and the ultraviolet A rays that cause tanning but also are associated with more serious and longer-term damage, such as skin cancer.

While my son inherited my wife's food allergies, my kids also unfortunately inherited my lack of pigmentation. Accordingly, I've gotten quite adept at reading sunscreen labels as well as food labels.

Currently, sunscreens must identify their SPF, or sun protection factor, which is a numerical rating system for UVB protection. The new rules propose capping the highest SPF value at 50, unless companies can provide the results of further testing that would support a higher number, implying better protection against UVB.

The rules would also require that if sunscreen makers want to make any claim that their products protect against UVA rays, whose damage is rarely immediately apparent, they must first assess such UVA protection in the laboratory and on people. Sunscreens would have a four-star system to rate their UVA protection identifying them as either "low," "medium," "high," or "highest." Companies that do not test would have to label their sunscreens as having "No UVA protection."

Any sunscreens claiming to be water resistant would have to list, in minutes, how long the products block the sun's rays before they have to be reapplied following swimming or sweating. Like the Treasury, the FDA will collect public comments for 90 days and if approved, the new rules would take effect at least 18 months later.

If all these labels are causing consumers stress so they have a cocktail, at least they'll now know how long they have to walk on the treadmill because they'll know exactly how many calories it will have.

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