The Federal Government recently released an independent review into Australia’s food labelling laws, which included recommendations on alcohol labelling. Drinks Trade reports.

The report looking into Australia’s food labelling laws, titled ‘Labelling Logic’, was headed by former Health Minister, Dr Neil Blewitt. In it, a number of consumer health messages for products and at point-of-sale were recommended for liquor products. The report stated: “The Panel therefore recommends that a suitably worded warning message about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant be mandated on individual containers of alcoholic beverages and at the point-of-sale for unpackaged alcoholic beverages; that the energy content be displayed on the labels of all alcoholic beverages, consistent with the requirements for other food products; and that drinks that are mixtures of alcohol and other beverages comply with all general nutrition food labelling requirements.” Drinks Trade sought opinion from both suppliers and industry associations.

**John Pollaers,**
Managing director
**Carlton & United Breweries**

As alcohol producers, we know that labels are great for brand recognition but as a communication device they have their limitations. To be blunt, consumers don’t spend a lot of time reading beer labels. They’ll know they are drinking a VB, not a XXXX, they may check the best before date or the standard drinks logo, but little much more. We also are very convinced that as Australians, we need to change our drinking culture. That means celebrating what is good about enjoying a drink with friends while making ‘drinking to get drunk’ unacceptable. No-one wants to see situations turn bad around alcohol – even if it is the minority - least of all our trade.

The simple test we apply when looking at labelling is: will it work, and will it help those most at risk of harm?

In our view, proposals for the addition of generic warning labels fail that test. While the evidence of alcohol related harms are very real, the link between warning labels and success at educating those at-risk groups just isn’t there.

All our products, packaging, promotional and point-of-sale materials include an ‘Enjoy Responsibly’ message. We provide nutritional information on products that make claims about low alcohol or carbohydrate content as we believe this information assists consumers in managing nutritional...
We add easy to read standard drink logos to help consumers who wish to monitor their consumption and we add batch codes and best before dates to protect the integrity of the product.

Cultural change will not be driven by a label or a ‘warning message’. Those who most need to heed the warning are the least likely to read it. That change will come from positive, broad based campaigns that start with parents and schools, and continue through vehicles such as the media, role models and websites.

We are committed to driving cultural change, which is why we support Drinkwise and their ‘Get the Facts’ online resources and we are looking at designing labels to direct consumers to sources of further information and education. We remain committed to working with Governments, the broader industry and the many health, education and sporting bodies to build better programs. What we hope not to do is commit time, resources and effort to initiatives that simply won’t move the dial.

**Tim Salt**
Managing director
**Diageo Australia**

There is no question that consumers should have the best possible information available to them so they can make informed decisions about drinking – or not drinking.

Indeed Diageo and others in our industry have taken significant voluntary action in recent years to improve information available to consumers and to promote responsible drinking on packaging and through other initiatives.

There is much for industry to offer on this important issue. From our perspective we look to give consumers information that is accurate, balanced and meaningful. Through our marketing expertise and experience, we have good insights into what works in communicating to the consumer.

On packaging, the industry already prioritises important facts on product strength and ABV. This includes a prominent standard drinks symbol on packaging, which we have voluntarily adopted.

Furthermore last November, along with other spirits producers within DSICA, we voluntarily applied the message ‘Is your drinking harming yourself or others’ on product packaging. The message was researched with consumers between 18 and 65 years old, and found that a question which encouraged them to consider the impact of excessive drinking on themselves and on those around them was most relevant.

The majority of Australians drink responsibly, and if there is a role for a responsibility message it should focus on deterring people from excessive consumption, rather than any consumption.

It was therefore surprising and disappointing to see ‘health warning’ labels recommended in the Blewett Report, despite acknowledgments in the same report that they are ineffective in changing behaviour. For example we believe that logos on alcohol products will not, on their own, help pregnant women make the right choices about alcohol consumption. This would be best done through targeted prenatal clinics or GP advice.

Further, the Blewett recommendation that only “drinks that are mixtures of alcohol and other beverages [must] comply with all general nutritional labelling requirements” is misguided. As a major spirits and RTD producer it makes no sense to us to put nutritional information on only one alcohol product type and exclude it on others. To be effective, product facts need to be consistently available across all products. Giving nutritional information to a Bundy RTD consumer, but not giving it to a beer drinker, is misleading and unhelpful for consumers.

As part of our global information policy, Diageo already provides detailed nutritional information through our website: www.drinkiq.com, which we promote on all our packaging. The site also provides facts about alcohol, information on its effects and advice on when not to drink. We agree with the report’s thinking that it is important to harness new technology to provide accessible information for consumers.

In the coming months, we look forward to an open and constructive debate. Industry has much to offer in the interest of supporting consumers to make informed choices.

**Gordon Broderick**
Executive director
**Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia**

The distilled spirits industry was very disappointed and a little surprised by the recommendations of the Blewett Labelling Review.

The disappointment was that the review’s recommendations do not miss any opportunity to increase the labelling regulation of alcohol products.

The only exemption that alcohol products gained was from front-of-pack traffic light labelling (where foods get a red, amber or green light for sugar, salt, fat, calories, etc) – and that was because alcohol products would get mostly ‘green lights’ and that might encourage drinking. So the Review team said the alcohol industry should not use traffic lights.

The surprise was how far the Review went ahead of the available evidence and research. The report itself noted that the effect of labelling was very hard to research effectively, and that more and better research should be done. However, this lack of research and evidence of effectiveness did not stop the review’s recommendations that alcohol products should carry health warning labels and pregnancy warning labels.

The Review was explicit – promoting preventative health should now be the second priority of labelling policy, after food safety. Taken all together, the recommendations show an enthusiasm for Government to appropriate the ‘real estate’ of the food and drink industry for its own purposes, such as promoting healthy diets. Pity the brand owners.

There were some good recommendations – such as a Trans-Tasman Labelling Bureau that would do research and help industry understand the regulations, and a greater emphasis on enforcing the labelling regulations so that not just the large and reputable companies comply.

**James Brindley**
Managing director
**Lion Nathan Australia**

Lion Nathan has agreed to voluntarily adopt consumer health messages that support responsible drinking choices (including during pregnancy), in response to Dr Blewett’s recommendations that:

- Generic alcohol warning to be placed on alcohol labels but only as an element of a comprehensive multifaceted national campaign targeting the public health problems of alcohol in society.
- A suitably worded warning message about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant be mandated on individual containers of alcoholic beverages and at the point of sale for unpackaged alcoholic beverages, as support for ongoing broader community education.

Because we believe this is the right thing to do we will take these steps regardless of the pending Government response to the report and the passage of enabling legislation. Our alcohol business will respond in detail in the coming weeks on how our support for broader consumer messaging will be best delivered across their individual portfolios, packaging types, markets and categories.
Pacific Beverages, the joint venture between Coca-Cola Amatil (CCA) and global brewer SABMiller, has committed to the use of responsibility messaging on all its beer brands and point-of-sale material. This process has already started and will be progressively rolled out over the next 12 months.

These messages will either be icon based or a combination of icon and text and will reflect the key principles and reinforce the principles of ‘Don’t Drink and Drive’ and ‘Only for People Over the Age of 18’.

This approach has been developed by SABMiller as part of the company’s global ‘Responsible Use of Alcohol’ strategy and this approach is being rolled out voluntarily in all its markets, whether mandated by law or not.

Peter McLoughlin, the CEO of Pacific Beverages said that mandatory or voluntary messages are just one component of a broader response regarding responsible alcohol consumption.

“We believe awareness, understanding, and behaviour change on irresponsible alcohol consumption can be achieved through appropriate communication. SABMiller is very transparent with its views and progress in this regard and all the policy details can be found on the SABMiller website ‘Talkingalcohol.com’,“ Peter McLoughlin said.

Pacific Beverages’ responsibility messages will be included in all commercial communications and will occupy approximately at least five per cent of the advertising or promotional space.

**Premium Wine Brands**

Pernod Ricard now uses the pregnancy warning pictogram across its product portfolio in Australia and New Zealand as part of a global policy introduced two years ago.

This policy was introduced by Premium Wine Brands proactively and in advance of the Australia/New Zealand Labelling Review, and is being rolled out progressively across all products.

The reason for this proactive move is PWB’s view that a pictogram is an effective way of communicating the pregnancy warning, and is preferable to a text warning. This conclusion was reached after extensive use of the pictogram across Europe, which set an international precedent. The pictogram is also easily understood across cultures and languages, and stands out from ‘label clutter’.

PWB believes, however, that there is a need for a comprehensive education and awareness campaign to be run by key stakeholders in conjunction with the use of proactive communications such as the pictogram warning.

**Stephen Strachan**

Chief executive

Winemakers’ Federation of Australia

Winemakers’ Federation of Australia (WFA) is concerned that the Blewett Review proposes changes to labelling requirements then claims more research is needed to prove whether labelling works as an intervention measure. We presented evidence which shows that it is ineffective at addressing behavioural issues.

We are pleased the committee exempts alcohol from its recommendation for ‘front-of-pack’ nutritional information panels and ‘traffic-light’ labelling, but urge the Government to confirm that the exemption extends to back labels as well.

We can accept pregnancy warnings. While questioning their value, we know that some people see this as an important specific issue and that some winemakers already use them in certain markets.

However, tobacco-style health warnings have no validity at all. They diminish a legal product without having any impact on the decisions of the minority who may choose to misuse it.

The worrying ‘sleeper’ for the wine sector is the proposal for energy content to be included, as it is on other food products. Even the smallest wineries produces a number of different styles, and each is different every vintage. At around $70 a time to test for energy content of a wine, we estimate this would cost winemakers a conservative $9 million a year – to provide information no one has asked for.

Wine already is a leader in providing information to consumers, both because we are required to and we choose to. If they want to know more, we will tell them – but it doesn’t necessarily need to be on the label.

Label space is at a premium and there is a real danger that Government information will crowd out factual information, particularly if new things have to be added to fit in with new health campaigns.

Australia also has international commitments on the standardisation of label information.