Foodstuffs, alcoholic beverages: labelling, presentation and advertising

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A highly controversial report on labelling the ingredients of alcoholic drinks - which up to now have been subject to less stringent labelling requirements than non-alcoholic beverages - was adopted by the Committee by 24 votes to 15 with 1 abstention. The committee was agreed on the principle of labelling. The main cleavage was between those who wanted future labelling rules for ingredients to be laid down in accordance with specific agricultural regulations governing particular beverages (where Parliament would not be involved) and those who wanted the rules drawn up outside the agricultural context in accordance with the codecision procedure (which would involve Parliament). Several individual amendments fell as result of tied votes. Twenty years after the adoption of the food labelling directive (79/112/EEC) - which, in the case of alcohol, simply promised future rules on labelling - there is still no comprehensive Community legislation on alcohol labelling. It was the proposal submitted by the Commission to plug this gap that the committee amended yesterday in adopting a report (codecision, first reading) by Horst SCHNELLHARDT (EPP, D). In the end, the committee voted that future labelling on the ingredients of most alcoholic drinks (including wine, liqueurs, spirits and beer) should be included in new annexes to the food labelling directive. Other alcoholic products should be covered by the existing labelling provisions of the directive (which currently do not cover the ingredients of alcoholic drinks). Further amendments adopted seek to: * extend the legal base of proposed directive to include Article 129a (consumer protection) as well as 100a (internal market); * ensure that the EU's Scientific Committee for Food, composed of independent experts, is consulted on all Commission proposals for labelling alcohol that might have implications for human health; * change the wording proposed by the Commission for introducing the list of ingredients from "prepared with" to simply "ingredients" (thus sticking to a formula with which the consumer is familiar). The need for consumer information on ingredients was all the more urgent, the committee stressed, since more and more alcoholic beverages whose composition and presentation were obviously geared to sales to young people (eg alcopops) had come on to the market in recent years. The labelling rules must be adopted within three years of 1 July 1998.