# International experts label new alcohol provisions an unacceptable trade-off

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### International health experts are increasingly concerned by the deliberate targeting of children by the alcohol industry and the absence of government regulatory frameworks to protect children and keep the industry in line.

Aussie consumers could be left exposed to greater alcohol harms as a result of soon-to-be ratified regional trade agreements.

Supplementary labelling rules intended to reduce the burden on alcohol manufacturers now threaten to deter the Commonwealth Government from introducing effective and mandatory health warning labels.

Australian and International alcohol policy experts meeting in Melbourne this week for the Global Alcohol Policy Conference (GAPC2017) have labelled the new alcohol provisions unacceptable and warn that once incorporated into regional agreements, the provisions are likely to become the global standard.

The new rules would mean wine and spirits suppliers would be allowed to place country-specific information on a supplementary label rather than the main label.

The provisions first appeared in the final text of the Tran-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). There are risks that this may still proceed in its current form despite the withdrawal of the United States. The provisions have also begun to appear in bilateral trade agreements, including the Agreement to Amend the Singapore Australia Free Trade Agreement.

They are also likely to be proposed for the 16-country Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

While extremely favourable to the alcohol industry, research indicates that supplementary labels are not the most effective way to promote health warnings.

GAPC keynote speaker Jane Kelsey, a professor of law, policy and international economic regulation at the School of Law at the University of Auckland, specialises in the implications of international trade and investment agreements, such as the TPP, and argues for the rights of governments to decide their own domestic regulations in the national interest.

“By prioritising the convenience and bottom line of the international alcohol producers in new regional and international trade deals, Australia is relinquishing its sovereignty over a critically important issue, the Government’s ability to provide its citizens with effective alcohol warning labels that can reduce the harms from alcohol,” Professor Kelsey said.

Health experts in Australia have long recommended the introduction of government-mandated health warning labels on alcohol products, with all the evidence showing warning labels would be most effective when they are visible, evidence-based, and applied consistently across all alcohol products.

In contrast, the current voluntary industry scheme has resulted in too few products carrying weak consumer messages that are hard to find and even harder to read.

Michael Moore, President of the World Federation of Public Health and Chief Executive of the Public Health Association of Australia says the new alcohol labelling provisions put forth in up-coming regional trade deals threaten to undermine the introduction of a more robust compulsory labelling regime.

“If alcohol warning labels are to be most effective they need to be applied in a consistent fashion. Unfortunately, by allowing international wine and spirits suppliers to place country-specific information on a supplementary label rather than the main label you significantly impact their effectiveness, Mr Moore said.

Of equal concern, Mr Moore says the new supplementary labelling rules present a further obstacle: the very real threat that the alcohol industry uses the new rules to legally challenge government-mandated health warnings if introduced.

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) Chief Executive Michael Thorn says recent history makes clear that the alcohol industry cannot be trusted to develop and implement alcohol-warning labels.

“At a time when the Commonwealth Government should be moving to a government-mandated labelling regime that would ensure Australian consumers would be are provided with information they require to minimise the harms from what is a highly toxic drug, the Australian Government is instead agreeing to international trade provisions that will effectively ties its hands and put the interests of Big Alcohol ahead of the health and wellbeing of Australians,” Mr Thorn said.

[view media release in pdf](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Media-Release-INTERNATIONAL-EXPERTS-LABEL-NEW-ALCOHOL-PROVISIONS-AN-UNACCEPTABLE-TRADE-OFF-Final-05102017.pdf)

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