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EU lawmakers reject colour-coded system for food labels [de] [fr]

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MEPs have rejected calls for a mandatory EU-wide 'traffic light' system for food labels similar to the one currently applied in the UK, much to the disappointment of European consumer and health groups.

BACKGROUND: In 2008, the European Commission proposed new legislation on providing food information to consumers. The proposal combines existing rules on food labelling and nutritional information in one regulation.

The aim is to make food labels clearer and more relevant to consumers and includes specific requirements for displaying information on the front of packaging.

The European Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee voted against the introduction of a compulsory 'traffic light' labelling system, which would have complemented the system of guideline daily amounts (GDAs) favoured by the food industry.

Voting 16 March on a European Commission proposal to combine existing EU rules on food labelling and nutritional information into one new regulation, MEPs agreed that key nutritional information such as energy content, fat, carbohydrates, sugar and salt must be displayed on front-of-pack labels. They also added proteins, fibre and trans fats to the mandatory list.

MEPs also added specific rules on the displaying of energy content, judging this to be the most important information for consumers.

The regulation should only lay down general rules on the displaying of nutritional information and not prescribe any specific system, thus allowing member states to use or adopt their own labelling rules, the committee said.

A cross-party coalition of MEPs from the socialist group (S&D), the far-left (GUE/NGL), the Greens and the liberal group (ALDE) attempted to include mandatory traffic light labelling, but these amendments were rejected.

The committee, which had debated the issue for 18 months against the backdrop of an ongoing battle between consumer groups and manufacturers, adopted its report only after some 800 amendments were voted upon.