

REFIT evaluation: Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 on Nutrition and Health Claims

Position Paper
10 October 2018

The European Salt Producers' Association (EUsalt) welcomes the REFIT – Evaluation of the Regulation on nutrition and health claims, Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006. As European salt producers, we have continuously advocated the need to promote a healthy, well-balanced, nutritious diet and lifestyle. However, we fear that nutrient profiling on which nutrient claims are based, may mislead consumers into believing that they are following a well-balanced, nutritious diet. EUsalt believes that the regulation should **focus on helping consumers achieve optimum nutrition to limit the negative impacts of malnutrition (over and under)**. Food fortification, e.g. with iodine or fluoride, should not be side-lined due to nutrient profiling. On the contrary, fortified salt is a crucial tool to achieve optimum nutrition. It should be regulated and harmonised throughout the EU, as it can help ensure a healthier Europe, without being at odds with the European Commission's salt reduction campaign.

Therefore, EUsalt calls upon the European Commission to recognise the importance of fortified foods for optimum nutrition, harmonise regulation throughout the EU and consider food fortification as a legitimate health claim. It is important for us to stress the following issues so that the European Commission fully comprehends the limitations nutrient profiling may have. We would like to encourage the Commission to recognise fortified salt as an important tool for Europeans' well-being and that food fortification regulation should be harmonised throughout the Union to ensure a level playing field within the single market.

SUMMARY:

1. **Nutrient profiles oversimplify health.** Nutrition and health claims which are based on nutrient profiling tend to be reductionist, as the health level of a certain foods is judged on simplified criterion. A multidimensional, holistic approach considering a person's environment needs to be implemented.
2. **Importance of salt fortification to tackle European health imbalances.** It is important to communicate to consumers the presence of nutrients in their products that have beneficial effects on their health. Therefore, the use of nutrition and health claims is essential and shouldn't be prohibited by the nutrient profiles' dispositions for fortified salts and food products using it.
3. **Lack of harmonised regulation regarding food fortification.** By harmonising the minimum amount of a micronutrient which can be added to salt, this will enable better competitiveness within the single market and contribute to a healthier nutritional diet for many Europeans who lack key nutrients. Furthermore, the use and promotion of fortified salt can work alongside the EU's policies that aim to reduce salt intake.

1. Nutrient profiles oversimplify health

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), nutrient profiling 'is the science of classifying or ranking foods according to their nutritional composition for reasons related to preventing disease and promoting health'¹. This includes various applications such as, health and nutrition claims, product labelling logos or symbols, information and education, etc.

EUsalt agrees that European consumers must have better consumption patterns with the help of more reliable information. However, nutrition and health claims which are based on nutrient profiling tend to be reductionist, as the health level of a certain food is judged on simplified criteria i.e. the total content level of fat, saturates, carbohydrate, sugars, protein and salt. Needless to say, that judging a food's nutritional benefits merely based on these criteria does not rightly assess the overall nutritional value of a food and may mislead consumers into believing that they have an optimum nutrition and healthy lifestyle. The current profiling mechanism does not evaluate the product as a whole and does not clearly provide information on the added nutrients a certain food provides. Therefore, consumers base their decision making on overly simplified knowledge and not on the overall nutritional added value of a product.

Furthermore, consumers receive varying information or are exposed to foods of different nutrition composition throughout the Union. This creates confusion due to multiple and possibly contradictory information or conclusions provided to consumers. Nutrient profiling does not take into account the varying nature of European food habits. Depending on the individual and their environment, people have varying nutritional needs.

Therefore, nutrient profiling can be a **useful tool** to encourage consumers in the right direction with regards to health and **should promote optimum nutrition**. Nutrient profiling should be used as a **complementary tool in helping consumers make healthier lifestyle choices and opt for optimum nutrition**. For this reason, the implementation of nutrient profiling should be **supported by further education and training** on healthy, well-balanced diet and focus on nutrition education, aiming at a correct interpretation of the term 'healthy', for which we would be willing to actively engage in. Together, we can work simultaneously to tackle key health issues such as lack of nutrients, lack of physical activity and pollution in order to guarantee a healthier life for Europeans. To fight illnesses linked to an unhealthy, unbalanced diet, **a multidimensional, holistic approach considering a person's environment needs to be implemented**. Therefore, if nutrient profiling is going to be used, it should respond to a systematic, transparent and logic methodological process, ideally agreed between the different sectors of each country or region involved.

¹ World Health Organisation (WHO), 2010, Nutrient Profiling: Report of WHO/IASO Technical Meeting.

2. Importance of salt fortification to tackle health imbalances.

Nutrient profiling is the science of classifying or ranking foods according to their nutritional composition to help prevent diseases and promote health. Therefore, **nutrition and health claims should consider and explicitly state whether a food has been fortified with vitamins or minerals**. The issue with the previously proposed text was that, while serving the purpose to help guide consumers to good dietary choices, nutrient profiles also prohibited the use of salt as a public health tool. Indeed, products containing fortified salt may exceed the nutrient profiles thresholds, therefore prohibiting any health claim. For example, fortified table salt contains at least 97% of sodium chloride², which prohibits any health claim and forbids all possibility for food operators and salt producers to inform consumers on the iodine, folic acid or fluoride present in a product. In addition, this outcome is threatening the different international initiatives to fight iodine and fluoride deficiencies, for which there is a significant lack of awareness throughout the European Union and the health problems that may ensue.

The choice of salt as a carrier for nutrients isn't random. On the contrary, it has been globally recognised that the use of salt as a carrier guarantees folic acid and/or iodine and/or fluoride intakes for a whole population, without discriminating certain social classes and independent of any dietary preference. It is also an ingredient that can be used in specific processed foods resulting to an easy control of nutrient intakes thereby avoiding any risk of over-exposure. Therefore, EUsalt supports the recommendations from the WHO 2008 Report³ for salt fortification and promotes the use of salt as carrier of essential nutrients.

To inform consumers about the beneficial effects of folic acid, iodine and fluoride intakes, salt producers and food operators need to be able to communicate about the presence of those nutrients in their products. Therefore, the use of nutrition and health claims is essential and shouldn't be prohibited by the nutrient profiles' dispositions for fortified salts and other food fortification processes. **EU salt calls for fortified table salt to be exempt from nutrient profiles, and for food products using fortified salt to be able to reference this fortification on their packaging.**

Food producers need to inform consumers about the iodine and/or fluoride content of their products so as to allow them to make well-informed choices, to contribute to consumers' better education, as well as to pursue the continuous efforts to fight nutrient deficiencies. Communication on foods relies on labelling and the possibility to resort to nutrition claims such as 'source of iodine and/or fluoride' are essential.

3. Lack of harmonised regulation regarding food fortification.

Furthermore, there is no harmonisation between Member states regarding the minimum amount of a micronutrient which can be added to salt, with some countries applying lower thresholds than others and with varying access to fortified salt. This is particularly the case for iodised salt, where access also

² CX STAN 150-1985, Codex Standard for Food Grade Salt, Amended 1-1999, 2-2001, 3-2006.

³ Report of a WHO Expert Consultation, *Salt as a Vehicle for Fortification*, 2008; *WHO Global Policy for Improvement of Oral Health*, World Health Assembly 2007, *International Dental Journal* (2008) 58, pp. 115-121

varies throughout the EU. With some Member States restricting or forbidding the presence of iodised salt in retail stores (United Kingdom) or in restaurants (France). **The lack of harmonisation undermines the free trade of fortified salt and its health benefits.** Furthermore, food based dietary guidelines are not harmonised because Member States each establish their own.

In the last few years, the salt reduction campaign led by the Commission has had dangerous effects on Europeans' iodine intake. We are concerned that nutrient profiling and nutritional claims will further aggravate this crucial nutritional issue. EUsalt acknowledges and is ready to work with the Commission to make sure that the **use and promotion of fortified salt is not in contradiction with EU policies aiming to reduce salt intake. The two objectives are not mutually exclusive, since the promotion of iodised/fluoridated salt does not lead to a higher salt consumption.**

By harmonising legislation, this will enable **better competitiveness within the single market and contribute to a healthier nutritional diet for many Europeans who lack key nutrients.** Together, we can make sure that the use and promotion of fortified salt works alongside the EU's policies aiming to reduce salt intake.

CONCLUSION:

EUsalt calls upon the European Commission to **recognise the importance of fortified foods for an optimum nutrition by exempting fortified table salt from nutrient profiles, to harmonise regulation throughout the EU and consider food fortification as a legitimate health claim.**

Nutrient profiling **should promote optimum nutrition** and should be used as a **complementary tool in helping consumers make healthier lifestyle choices and opt for optimum nutrition.** However, a **multidimensional, holistic approach considering a person's environment needs to be implemented** to tackle issues such as lack of nutrients, lack of physical activity, pollution in order to guarantee a healthier life for Europeans. To inform consumers about the beneficial effects of nutrient intakes, salt producers and food operators need to be able to communicate about the presence of nutrients in their products. In fact, **salt should be used as a public health tool to ensure that dietary imbalances, leading to nutrient deficiencies, are addressed thus ultimately preventing deficiencies.** Using salt as a vehicle for iodine, folic acid and fluoride is a reliable, easily controllable, inexpensive, quick and efficient solution to help ensure optimal levels of consumption of these nutrients.

Furthermore, harmonising legislation is essential to enable better competitiveness within the single market and contribute to a healthier nutritional diet for many Europeans who lack key nutrients. **The EUsalt team wishes to work closely with the Commission** to make sure that the use and promotion of fortified salt does not hinder EU policies aiming to reduce salt intake.