



UN food trade standard-setting body refuses to negotiate guidance for health warnings and advertising restrictions for alcohol, but finally relents on the need for special safeguards for infant food labelling in emergencies

Ottawa (May 15, 2026)—Bill Jeffery, Executive Director and General Legal Counsel of the Centre for Health Science and Law (CHSL), made the following statement at the end of the substantial portion of standard setting negotiations at the Codex Committee on Food Labelling.

Most (likely all) international trade agreements authorize governments to implement well-designed regulatory measures to protect the health of their own populations. But, uncertainty about what exactly are considered sensible, proportionate regulatory measures can put a chill on innovative national health protection laws, like alcohol-cancer risk warnings, and bans of the promotion and sale of infant formula, especially for low-resource economies. Their government legal defense teams can be vastly outmatched by counterparts in rich government legal defence teams like in the United States and Europe or many Fortune 500 companies whose global sales revenues exceed the receipts of entire countries in the Global South. We saw this play out with tobacco control regulations because news media outlets reported on it.

Creating certainty about what constitutes reasonable, justifiable health protection measures is the primary purpose of global food labelling standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Such clarity can be good for population health and helps create certainty for business in international or domestic trade. However, regulations that effectively ensure consumers are effectively forewarned of risks of harmful products and are spared promotions and advertising for them reduce harmful consumption and, by extension, increase consumption of healthy products. Not surprisingly, companies that stand to lose sales fight aggressively to quash or dilute health protection laws and Codex standards. Several high-income countries that host huge multinational food companies—including, the United States, Japan and the European Union—trumpeted the commercial importance of infant formula and alcohol, but ignored their negative health impacts, especially in low-income countries whose health care systems are not equipped to treat the acute and chronic life-threatening illnesses caused by these products.

When rich countries can essentially obstruct public health law- and policy-formation worldwide, we have to wonder what checks and balances can make the Codex system work according to its mandate. Over the years, news media coverage of Codex negotiations has been scant, at best. In the early days of Codex food labelling standards, they were drafted in a Health Canada boardroom with a few bureaucrats from a handful of countries and mattered little more than musty library books. Since the 1990s, Codex standards have been officially recognized by the World Trade Organization for resolving trade disputes and have attracted the concerted attention of senior government officials representing nearly 100 governments, dozens of food industry associations lobbyists and attorneys, and a cadre of small public health and child protection organization.

The [draft official text of the report confirming these decisions](#) will be vetted by the final plenary session of the Committee on Friday, May 15, 2026.

BACKGROUND FROM EARLY THIS WEEK

UN food trade standard-setting body waffles on warning labels and ad bans for alcohol & undermines World Health Organization guidance on labelling food in emergencies

Ottawa (May 11, 2026)—Bill Jeffery, Executive Director and General Legal Counsel of the Centre for Health Science and Law (CHSL), made the following statement on the week-long negotiations of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling. Since 1965, Canada has hosted and chaired the Codex Committee on Food Labelling: a committee of a joint commission between the UN World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization. This year, approximately 300 government representatives and, largely industry, non-governmental observers have convened in Ottawa and virtually to negotiate global labelling standards.

Much of the time of Codex standard-setting is dedicated to wordsmithing standards related to informal trade disputes about specialized commodities, such as spices, with no public health or environmental impact. But there is widespread concern that Codex decisions about whether and how to negotiate truly consequential health and consumer protection standards are hindered by commercial interests.

For instance, despite accepting that alcohol consumption causes an estimated 2.6 million deaths (and rising) per year worldwide (and 17,000 per year in Canada alone), the Committee has waffled on setting standards to authorize the use of warning labels and advertising bans to reduce alcohol consumption since the World Health Organization first urged action at a 2017 Committee meeting in Paraguay. By contrast, Health Ministers attending annual World Health Assembly meetings in Geneva approved and support implementing the “[Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol](#)” which established the importance of:

- “mandated health warnings on alcohol-product containers”;
- “providing consumer information about, and labelling alcoholic beverages to indicate, the harm related to alcohol”; and
- “regulating direct or indirect marketing in certain or all media.”

Likewise, the Committee is considering new rules to allow flexible food labelling during emergencies in ways that could undermine World Health Organization strict guidance called “[Operational Guidance on Infant Feeding in Emergencies](#)” that details the [International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes](#), a quasi-treaty that was adopted by member states of the World Health Assembly in 1981 for which progress reports and refinements are adopted every two years. A Codex Working Group that refined the proposal was chaired by the United States, the only government in the world that opposed the adoption of the International Code in 1981; the US delegation included a representative of global infant formula manufacturing giant, Abbott.

About the Centre for Health Science and Law: CHSL is a national health advocacy organization focussed on food issues and based in Canada’s national capital region. CHSL’s

Executive Director and General Legal Counsel, Bill Jeffery, has participated in nearly all Codex Committee on Food Labelling negotiations since 1999 and has participated in many other United Nations food and health rights deliberations in Geneva and New York. He can be reached at Bill@HealthScienceAndLaw.ca or mobile/WhatsApp 1-613-565-2140.

Legal significance of Codex Standards: Codex standards are recognized by the World Trade Organization as authoritative reference standards for resolving trade disputes and, by extension, influence the scope of domestic food labelling laws. Codex standards are not minimum standards. Rather, they are semi-permeable ceiling standards in the sense that national laws that give the same or less consumer protection as the Codex standards are largely immune for trade challenge, but higher national standards must be demonstrated by additional evidence to be necessary and proportionate by the respective governments.