



GENERAL MILLS

November 9, 2007

Division of Dockets Management
(HFA 305)
Food and Drug Administration
5630 Fishers Lane Room 1061
Rockville, MD 20852

Re: Docket No. 2007N-0277 Food Labeling: Use of Symbols to Communicate Nutrition Information, Consideration of Consumer Studies and Nutritional Criteria; Public Hearing; Request for Comments.

Dear Sir or Madam:

General Mills (GMI) appreciates the opportunity to offer written comments concerning the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) request for comments on the use of symbols to communicate nutrition information on the food labels. Our written comments will further expand our oral comments presented at FDA's hearing this past September and will address FDA's questions and issues on this topic.

GMI is a Delaware Corporation with its general offices at No. 1 General Mills Boulevard, Minneapolis, MN 55426. GMI is a major packaged-food manufacturer engaged for over 75 years in the development and production of food products including flour, ready-eat-cereals, refrigerated dough products, cake and other dessert mixes, soups, vegetables, snacks and numerous other products.

We have been committed to nutrition labeling for over 30 years beginning with voluntary labeling in 1974. We currently have nutrition labeling on more than 1500 retail products. Over the years, we have added additional information and claims to our products in response to increased consumer interest in the relationship between diet and health. GMI firmly believes in the value of communicating a product's nutritional attributes through various media, including front-of-package. We apply current regulations and our own stringent guidelines to ensure that all of our front-of-package claims are appropriate and truthful. In addition, consumer research has guided our efforts towards front-of-package changes that can play an important role in helping consumers make informed choices.

Hence, General Mills advocates for a front of package labeling system that reflects these key principles:

- Aligns with existing regulatory framework
- Is fact-based, truthful and objective, therefore grounded in science
- Helps consumers make informed food choices
- Involves consumers in determining healthfulness of a food and individual needs

Acknowledging that there is an opportunity for industry to develop a voluntary and unified front of package labeling system and if industry attempts this endeavor, we believe a fact-based approach is the best approach and should be pursued. Even so, before any system is chosen it should be tested to ensure that it helps consumers make informed nutritional choices for their needs and it motivates changes in eating behavior. If research does not demonstrate this, then it should not be endorsed as a unified system since it will result in a significant cost to industry and consumers.

General Mills recommends a fact-based approach to front of package nutrition labeling and believes calories on the front of all food products is the most important aspect of fact-based labeling

Diet and health are important issues, and interest in this area is high for many stakeholders, including consumers, government and industry. Certainly, concern about the state of the nation's health is growing, however, obesity and conditions linked to obesity have been the subject of particular concern. As such, it has prompted several initiatives from various entities-including food industry initiatives on front-of-package nutrition symbols. Therefore, if the aim is to target obesity given its significance to public health then calories on the front of **all** products is critical as a way to increase consumer awareness.

The concept of addressing calories is based on science and government recommendations. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005* emphasize that most Americans need to eat fewer calories, be more active and make wiser food choices, and that for weight loss, calories count – as it is the primary factor in the energy balance equation. FDA's *Calories Count* report stated it's a "scientific fact that weight control requires caloric balance" and that consumption and expenditure of calories is most important for maintenance of a healthy weight, not proportion of macronutrients.

We recognize the opportunity and importance to attend to nutrition quality while addressing obesity. Hence, a more comprehensive approach to include calories and other nutrition attributes would be forthcoming. That is, the potential to highlight a variety of "positive" and "negative" nutrients including those in the nutrition facts panel and those deemed critical¹, as well as the potential to highlight key food groups².

¹ *Dietary Guidelines* recommend increasing intakes of certain nutrients of concern for Americans (calcium, potassium, fiber, magnesium, vitamin E) and limiting intakes of saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium and added sugar.

² *Dietary Guidelines* state many Americans fall short of food group recommendations for fruit, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy.

Merits of a fact-based approach

A fact-based approach is defined as front of package nutrition information from the nutrition facts panel via a series of icons or thumbnails. General Mills believes a fact-based approach is the ideal way to achieve these public health objectives as it presents several advantages:

- Is based on criteria established by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for labeling regulations, thus a government-defined criteria are transparent and scientifically grounded
- Aligns with the Dietary Guidelines by building upon its established goals; while not the main goal of the system, it would help achieve the recommendations
- Enables consumers to make decisions to best meet their dietary needs by honoring consumer individuality-consumers have varying health and nutrition concerns and therefore are looking for different information
- Helps improve consumer awareness and understanding of nutrients and calories, within the context of a healthy balanced diet
- Allows consumers to make comparisons across all categories of food by providing quantitative and objective nutrition facts for simple communication that is applicable to all foods
- Does not require consumers understanding of individual manufacturers' systems
- Assures regulatory compliance without significant economic impact since it coordinates with the nutrition facts panel, hence no additional regulations or monitoring is required
- Motivates food companies to maintain on-going product nutritional improvement while maintaining taste and consumer appeal
- Advances in nutrition science can be nimbly incorporated which results in a sustainable system
- Avoids unintended misunderstanding inherent in an oversimplified system
- Is a better tool for education than a single "better for you" approach because the basic information is foundational in nature to help consumers build a balanced diet

Consumer Research

Consumer research plays an integral role in our recommendation. GMI launched front-of-package icons called "Goodness Corner" in our cereal package to communicate key nutrition facts in 2004³. This was a fact-based system tied to FDA's labeling and claims regulations. This system took into consideration calories and both "positive" and "negative" nutrients or food group contribution as a way that would allow simple communication of a food's nutritional contribution to consumers. The front-of-package icons were self-explanatory and could be used in conjunction with nutrition or health claims.

³ See Attachment 1 for graphic image

Subsequent consumer research establishes that consumers want labeling to have key nutrition facts needed to quickly make purchase decisions. The facts sought by consumers include full disclosure of nutrients-those deemed “positive” e.g. vitamins and minerals, and those deemed “negative” e.g. saturated fat and sodium. Consumers are also seeking the right amount of important information, including % Daily Value (DV). Also of significance, is that the system be endorsed by a credible 3rd party, not manufacturer or brand. The research indicates government endorsement is important for credibility. Lastly, consumers prefer a tangible, believable and easy to understand system⁴.

Based on this research, our commitment to strengthening our nutrition guidelines and other factors in the global marketplace such as aligning with some of the manufacturers’ system being proposed in Europe, our “Goodness Corner” has evolved into “Nutrition Highlights”⁵. We’ve added amount and % DV to a fact-based system on the cereal front panel to help consumers quickly see key nutrition facts⁶.

European research reinforces our findings-consumers preferred a Guideline Daily Amount (GDA) system over traffic lights, icons or checkmarks⁷.

Concerns about other approaches such as a “better for you” or “traffic/stop lights” labeling/symbols

We know a number of approaches exist in the marketplace and have been presented to the agency. General Mills does not support alternative approaches that do not reflect the above stated principles. In anticipation of some of these recommended approaches, we set forth our thoughts and our rationale for not supporting them.

Concerns about “better for you”

A “better for you” approach is defined as front of package nutrition information within each category or select categories via a single/summary icon based on pre-set nutrition criteria. General Mills believes there are unintended consequences tied to a “better for you” approach:

- There seems to be an underlying assumption that selecting the most nutritious foods will improve body weight or stem the obesity tide. A “better for you” system could have the unintended consequence of implying “eat all you want” because it does not enable consumers to understand the importance of calories and nutrition for making dietary choices
- Single summary icon information does not provide adequate information to help the consumer understand key product nutrition attributes and the product in context of the daily diet. Consumers need information about all foods if they are to make dietary choices that affect the quality of their diet

⁴ General Mills U.S. Nutrition Icon Consumer Research 2006

⁵ The “Nutrition Highlights” features six icons on the front panel showing amount and Daily Value for calories, saturated fat, sodium, sugar (no DV) and two “positive” nutrients contributed by the product

⁶ See Attachment 2 for graphic image

⁷ Cereal Partners Worldwide (General Mills/Nestle) Nutrition Icon Consumer Research 2006

- Does not rely on individual's judgment of a food's healthfulness and whether it meets their dietary needs
- Is a subjective system and appears only on selected foods thereby perpetuating the "good food" vs. "bad food" myth
- Since "better for you" criteria differ by food category, it does not allow for comparison across all categories of food
- Would require developing an infrastructure to monitor and regulate since it does not link with the nutrition facts panel and therefore is not transparent
- Manufacturers are less likely to be incented to continuously improve the product once the "better for you" criteria is met
- Use of system may differ at point-of-purchase vs. at home; consumers decision of what to consume are exerted in a different context and setting
- Is not a good tool for education since it does not provide a contextual framework for consumers to build their diet

Concerns about "traffic lights"

A "traffic light" approach is defined as front of package nutrition information via traffic light colored icons (red, yellow and green) representing the amount of certain nutrients present in a food. General Mills also has concerns about a "traffic lights" approach, some of which are the same as a "better for you" approach:

- Seeks to communicate food in terms of risk, rather than nutrition since the traffic-light system categorizes foods according to how "bad" they are for consumers. There is an associative risk of "red traffic light" foods with "danger" and this is an unfit approach to food and nutrition
- Does not provide a positive incentive for manufacturers to continuously improve products nor for consumers to make dietary changes
- Is an oversimplified system that may work with foods on the extreme of health spectrum, however difficult and confusing when distinctions are subtle
- Does not assist the consumer to make fully informed choices. A "green traffic light" system could have the unintended consequence of implying "eat all you want" because it does not enable consumers to understand the importance of calories and nutrition for making dietary choices
- Is it not realistic to expect for consumers to avoid eating any "red-labeled" foods and therefore not constructive
- There is no scientific or regulatory basis for color-labeling food products

Consumer research is needed to identify the most appropriate system

During the FDA hearing several stakeholders shared sales data and consumer purchase patterns related to foods that carried a "better for you" and/or "traffic light" system. General Mills strongly questions the significance of this research relevant to consumer dietary intake and can't be extrapolated to behavior or dietary change. Therefore, we think it is critical to test approaches to determine an understanding and/or influence on behavior or dietary change.

In summary, General Mills thinks that the ideal front panel labeling should:

- Be fact-based, truthful and objective
- Fit within existing labeling regulatory framework
- Be applicable to all foods
- Be science-based and adaptable as new science emerges and incorporates Dietary Guidelines
- Address calories and nutrients, including both “positive and “negative”
- Have a realistic goal as to what a system can accomplish
- Provide information to help consumers make appropriate food choices that fits their needs
- Not be expected by itself to reduce chronic disease, including obesity
- Involve the consumer as the decision maker of a food’s healthfulness for their dietary needs
- Be relatively easy, simple and understandable for consumers
- Be researched and tested with consumers

GMI commends FDA on their efforts to seek information on the use of symbols to communicate nutrition information on food labels. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important food labeling issue, and look forward to working with the agency in the months ahead.

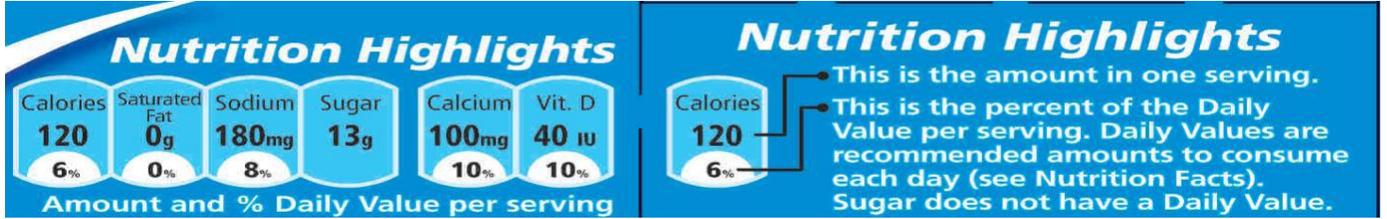
Respectfully submitted,

Kathryn L. Wiemer, MS, RD
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Attachment 1
Icons with % Daily Value



Attachment 2
Nutrition Highlights



Front Panel

Side Panel