

"We are entitled to know."

A personal submission to the HOR Committee examining Country of Origin Food Labelling

We and almost ALL of our friends and family are disillusioned when it comes to honest labelling. I would like to share our experience and a few suggestions, if I could. Apologies in advance for the layout of my views/suggestions. I have chosen to highlight but one of the many foods we consume which are subject to misleading advertising, in order to provide an anecdotal example of the issues we and other consumers face, on many products.

These issues cross into all forms of food in all supply outlets. From canned, dried, bottled, meat, veg, dairy etc. Many foods are poorly, inadequately and deceptively labelled. Too many foods contents are hidden behind a weak and convoluted labelling regime, and even weaker or non-existent enforcement practises. My submission also goes to not only country of origin issues, but it deliberately highlights the big picture labelling inadequacies experienced by every consumer every day. So please forgive the added issues such as 'contents', but I believe country of origin is a part of the issue. The quality of the food is directly linked to its source and the QA/regulations and methodology at the source, by way of everything from paddock to shelf.

For health reasons I have been a consumer of apple and pear juice (and combinations of them) for some time. In recent times I (we) have come to be very frustrated by food labelling and the contents possibly within. The problem being that contents may be known and not identified, or unknown.

The same can be said of the origin of the contents.

I abhor the deceptive practise of large text alerting consumers to what a 'liquid mixture' doesn't contain.

"No added this, no sugar, no artificial...etc".

And yet the small print admits to the contents being completely ambiguous in content and origin. The idea of drinking 'foreign water' or any unknown ingredient, via imported ingredients/concentrates within a juice I chose for health purposes is a frightening prospect.

Truth in advertising/labelling, I feel, is a much bigger issue than just the various industries being impacted. It goes to consumers getting what they pay for, and more importantly NOT compromising their health. There is an element of big retailers concealing info from consumers, and also an element of govts and legislators and industry bodies 'protecting' foreign traders/suppliers and singling out certain countries for protection from full scrutiny.

Then there are the social issues directly and indirectly associated with competing imports. Employment etc.

But fundamentally surely if we are to be forced to put up with foreign products or foreign additives we are legally and ethically/morally entitled to know what crosses our lips and our children's/grandchildren's lips?

I feel we are being cornered by the duopoly of supermarkets, in their drive to secure all sections of the market with generic products. Fruit juice being a case in point.

The level of concern for safe eating and honest labelling is enormous. But the power of the larger supermarkets seem to thwart or dilute, delay all attempts by consumers and representative groups to secure progress on any changes to labelling laws and regs.

I feel that any big retailer campaign to resistance to change needs to be resisted emphatically. This may be where the ACCC needs to be further bolstered.

I am sure there have been (too) many enquiries and consumer surveys on this issue, and I am sure they all had a similar end point." Consumers want (demand) to know the exact origin and quality of the food they consume."

I believe this is a huge issue with consumers constantly pitted against an unacceptably reticent business community, and it therefore requires a comparably large counter response by our govts (at all levels) and industry, to restore balance, simply due to the two big supermarkets and the control they seek to shore up with the control of as many products as they can.

I also believe another valid part of this debate is arguing that 'the reality is that labelling has not kept pace with the expansion of imported products and Australia's rapid expansion of offshore suppliers'.

What has brought Suzie (wife) and I to this position of frustration and disappointment, is the simple task of sourcing a pure apple or pear juice, even if it had other concentrates(sourced locally) in it. Even things called 'Just Juice' were anything but. Most, if not all, of the products we saw/see may as well have read 'contains a liquid of unknown origin, but which *luckily* tastes a lot like a pome fruit.'

Some of the behaviour changes I/we have made based on the labelling deficiencies were, (and which when expanded would impact producers/industry) > buying less product, > buying a similarly labelled product of lower price, and finally changing from juice consumption to cordial consumption. I believe many other households share similar

experiences, with a wide variety of food types. These changes in consumer behaviour have the direct impact of driving local producers to closure by way of income lost, and therefore impacting on local jobs. This has an amplification effect which perpetuates and snowballs the job loss scenario.

In a bitter experience the world discovered, via the tragic Chinese milk protein additive incident, that we cannot be too informed when it comes to food content.

"We are entitled to know."

Fruit juice, of course, is just one product suffering the fallout of the blatantly inadequate labelling rules in Australia. All products need to be included in the drive to arrest the current 'smoke and mirror approach' to labelling content, be it origin or ingredient. Every indication points to those dominant big players resisting change. They have an obvious agenda to conceal content information if that continues to provide higher profit margins. This is a slap in the face to food safety and consumer loyalty. But moreover I believe it is a deliberate dereliction of the basic Duty of Care all Australians demand and are lawfully entitled to, from those who sell the staple of life. Safe food and drink.

"We are entitled to know."

I encourage the committee to expand their good work on the labelling front to demand rapid and wholesale change and that elected reps should take heart that most (if not all) Australian consumers demand or stand by such an outcome. Finally I would say that the big players will use the argument that label changing will 'cost' consumers, who will/would resist the higher price and opt for the cheaper version. Firstly I deny that claim emphatically, it is an industry furphy and secondly this view has NEVER been a legitimate justification to limit consumer choice or limit food safety. Lastly I would say the 'cost' of our personal health and safety far exceeds that of the price of the actual product. My final two phrases are the key drivers and the moral and legal imperatives in this debate.

"Duty of Care".

"We are entitled to know."

Regards,
Colin Fairclough
Western Australia