

Sonoma County wine industry benefits from new federal guidelines over alcohol use



Michael O'Looney of Martinelli Winery, left, talks with a group of Gallo employees as they taste wine at the Martinelli Winery near Forestville, Friday, July 31, 2020. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2020

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California's wine and beer industries won a victory Tuesday when the federal government reversed course and rejected proposed guidelines that urged men to limit themselves to one drink of alcohol a day, half the current recommended cap.

The Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services overruled a finding by a scientific panel earlier this year that concluded alcohol beverages were an "unhealthy substance" and recommended that men limit themselves to one drink a day, the current standard in place for women. The recommendations are part of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans that are revised every five years.

In a statement, the departments found "there was not a preponderance of evidence" in the panel's finding to make the change to one drink per day for men. It provided the same reasoning to overturn another panel's proposal to reduce consumption of sugars added to drinks and foods.

Some industry analysts had warned the proposed guidelines would reduce consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages in a marketplace where sales are essentially flat. The Wine Institute, the main wine trade association for California vintners, launched a campaign to defend existing guidelines on consumption of alcohol.

Joined by the Beer Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, the Wine Institute argued that the totality of the science didn't support changing the current guidelines, which had been in place since 1990. "We support the long-standing scientific assessment reflected in the guidelines as they are today," said Tracy Genesen, general counsel for the Wine Institute.

The federal agencies came around to that view even though recent studies have triggered more concern about alcohol. The panel's report, for example, noted that alcohol use "is likely causally associated" with seven types of cancer. "The emerging evidence noted in the Committee's report does not reflect the preponderance of evidence at this time," the departments noted in a statement.

"It's really good news," said Rob McMillan, executive vice president of Silicon Valley Bank's wine division. "Once the government comes out with a finding, then others start to use it to support other points of view."

Michael Haney, executive director of the Sonoma County Vintners, said he was glad the decision was made on the "majority of the scientific evidence out there." Haney also noted that the local industry needed some good news because it was already reeling after the pandemic closed tasting rooms and this summer's wildfires ruined a significant portion of the North Coast grape crop.

"Right now our wineries are looking for stability and predictability," he said.

The decision was a blow to those who were pushing for stricter guidance, but not surprising given the lobbying clout of the alcohol industry. Last week, the sector was successful in persuading Congress to make permanent tax breaks that would lower the federal excise tax on alcohol beverages that President Donald Trump signed into law.

"I am disappointed, but not surprised. The alcohol industry does have a lot of pull and seems like they were chiming into that process," said Carson Benowitz-Frederick, research manager for Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael-based advocacy group that calls for higher taxes and additional regulation of alcohol.

Despite the setback, Benowitz-Frederick noted that the recommendations did contain significant caution over the use of alcohol beverages. Notably, the guidelines did not recommend "that individuals who do not drink alcohol start drinking for any reason." That could put a crimp on recruiting new drinkers, he said, noting how the wine industry as part of its messaging has used research since the late 1980s that showed a Mediterranean diet accompanied by moderate drinking of red wine helped to curb heart disease.

"It says under all circumstances, drinking less is healthier," Benowitz-Frederick said.

The guidelines had a notable section on the calories contained with beer, wine and spirits — which has become more of an issue as younger drinkers flock to hard seltzers that have a calorie count of less than 100 per serving.

"Alcoholic beverages may contain calories from both alcohol and other ingredients, such as soda, juice, and added sugars. It is important to consider ingredients and portion size," the guidelines read.

Benowitz-Frederick called that "reassuring messaging" for American consumers. "The public health establishment is starting to actively move the conversation away from some of the dangerous alcohol marketing points," he said.

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