

## The U.S. could soon declare alcohol unsafe. The wine industry says the process is rigged

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Public perception of alcohol has become increasingly negative, fueled in part by changing global health guidance. Now, proponents and opponents of alcohol are waging war over a coming update to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines.

Steven Boyle / The Chronicle

Alcohol, in many circles in America, has suddenly transformed from a hero to a villain.

For decades, the idea of moderate drinking as a healthy habit was enshrined in American life. A glass of [red wine](#) with dinner reduced the risk of heart disease, the thinking went. The U.S. government has long reinforced this notion: For more than 40 years, its official dietary guidelines have held that one drink a day is safe for women, and two drinks a day for men.

But in recent years, public opinion around drinking has shifted dramatically. The percentage of Americans who believe moderate alcohol consumption is bad for you nearly doubled — from 22% to 39% — between 2005 and 2023, according to [Gallup polling](#). This contemporary movement toward temperance culminated in the World Health Organization’s monumental declaration last year: “No level of alcohol consumption is safe for our

health,” the group announced, citing increased cancer risk. Since then, the global wine industry has experienced a [historic downturn](#) in sales.

Now, the debate over alcohol and health is mounting into a full-blown battle. On one side is the \$260 billion U.S. alcohol industry, which maintains that science is on its side and which characterizes its opponents as neo-Prohibitionists who are cherry-picking data. On the other is a network of organizations and advocates who point out alcohol is a known carcinogen, see it as a social ill, and believe that the industry has wielded its power to inappropriately influence legislation and scientific research.

A victor could emerge soon. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines will be updated in 2025, and the alcohol industry fears that this edition could bring the first-ever change in alcohol guidance since the guidelines’ inception in 1980. If the government recommends a reduction in the volume of alcohol consumption considered safe — or if it goes so far as to follow the World Health Organization’s “no safe level” framing — that would be the strongest message yet to the American public.

But the alcohol industry, which is legally prohibited from making health claims to consumers, believes it’s not a fair fight. The government agencies and research laboratories where this battle is ostensibly being fought, industry advocates say, have been infiltrated by anti-alcohol zealots.

“This group of activists have a clear narrative that is ideological,” said Dr. Amanda Berger, vice president of science for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. “The ‘no safe level’ message is not grounded in science.”

## **The dietary guidelines, a minefield of controversy**

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines may sound like a boring bureaucratic document, but they do ultimately permeate the culture. While people may not be looking up the government’s recommended daily serving of protein before deciding what to cook for dinner, most Americans can remember learning the basic contours of the food pyramid. The guidelines “are taught in K-12. They’re taught in medical school,” said Tom Wark, executive director of the National Association of Wine Retailers.

If the dietary guidelines were reduced to recommend a maximum of two drinks per week, according to a 2023 poll by the firm Wine Opinions, two-thirds of respondents ages 21-39 said they would either adopt the new guidance or decrease their current alcohol consumption.

The government updates the guidelines every five years, and Congress appropriated \$1.3 million for the update due in 2025. This time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services added an unprecedented step to the revision process, creating a second scientific advisory panel for the express purpose of examining alcohol consumption. Instead of reviewing existing evidence, as is customary for the document’s revision, this second committee is conducting original research. The committee recently published its planned research methodology, which will include mathematical modeling to estimate the impact of various levels of alcohol consumption on injury, disability and death.

The new panel drew immediate controversy. Critics have fervently objected to the fact that it’s a subcommittee of a group called the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking, or ICCPUD (an acronym sometimes pronounced aloud as “ick-pud”). This examination of adult consumption is outside of the committee’s authorized purview, both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have asserted.



Dr. Laura Catena, a vintner and physician in San Francisco, is one of the few voices saying that alcohol in moderation is health neutral, not healthy or unhealthy.

Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

“ICCPUD’s authority and oversight are specifically related to underage drinking priorities,” former U.S. Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard, who sponsored the bill that created the committee in 2006, wrote in an August letter to the heads of the federal agencies in charge of the review, Xavier Becerra of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Agriculture Department’s Thomas Vilsack. “ICCPUD was never intended to participate in activities related to adult alcohol consumption.”

On top of that, the committee has not said how the six scientists on the subcommittee were chosen. In June, 15 alcohol industry groups sent a joint [letter](#) to Becerra and Vilsack complaining of the secrecy surrounding that selection process. The letter writers demanded that the dietary guidelines review be “transparent, free from bias and solely based on the preponderance of scientific and medical knowledge, as required by the law.” (Anti-alcohol groups, too, have objected to this lack of transparency.)

The makeup of the committee is of such dire concern to the alcohol industry because, its proponents believe, several of the scientists on the committee’s panel have demonstrated biases against alcohol. All six panelists are experts in substance use disorders — whereas industry advocates argue that the panel ought to include experts, such as cardiologists, on other health effects of alcohol besides chronic use.

“Where we don’t want to see changes,” Berger cautioned, “is when they are born from ideology and not from evidence.”

One ICCPUD panelist, Dr. Priscilla Martinez, works for Alcohol Research Group, whose [stated vision](#) is “a future with greatly reduced alcohol- and other drug-related harms.” Two others, Drs. Jurgen Rehm and Kevin Shield, work for Canada’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, studying the socioeconomic effects of

alcohol and drug use. Rehm and panelist Dr. Katherine Keyes have [said publicly](#) they believe there is no safe level of alcohol consumption.

But no member of the panel has drawn more scrutiny than Dr. Tim Naimi, a Canadian researcher whom critics describe as an anti-alcohol vigilante. (Naimi declined to be interviewed for this article, citing the “heavily politicized” nature of the debate.)

The director of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria, Naimi has authored dozens of studies that find negative physical and public outcomes from alcohol consumption. He’s also become the go-to expert on temperance, a frequent commentator in news articles about the dangers of alcohol. “Drink less, live more,” he [told](#) the Washington Post in 2023, in a characteristic remark.

The ICCPUD panel is not Naimi’s first brush with public policy. As part of the scientific review panel for the last revision of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines, in 2020, Naimi called for reducing the recommended safe consumption from two drinks per day to one for men. But federal agencies rejected that recommendation, and the guidelines for alcohol remained unchanged.

Naimi played a similar role in his home country, Canada, which was revising its own dietary guidelines in 2021. There, a panel he served on with Rehm and Shield recommended an even larger reduction: Instead of the 15 drinks per week for men and 10 for women that Canada deemed safe, the panel advised limiting consumption to two drinks per week — the equivalent of less than three tablespoons of wine per day.

Canada, too, rejected Naimi’s suggestion. But you wouldn’t know that from the press coverage that followed, in which numerous articles [falsely announced](#) Canada’s overhauled new alcohol policy.

“As a communication tool it was brilliant,” said Dr. Tim Stockwell, Naimi’s colleague and frequent collaborator at the University of Victoria, who also served on the Canadian panel. “It got coverage all over the world.” An Oxford-educated psychiatrist, Stockwell’s quiet, British-accented speaking manner can seem to suggest he’s unaware of his central role in an international culture war. But he’s frequently reminded. “I’ve had several personal attacks from the industry,” said Stockwell. “It’s an interesting position. You publish something negative and it’s assumed that you wanted to find something negative.”

Attacks on Naimi and Stockwell, who is not on the ICCPUD panel, have focused on travel funding they’ve received from the Swedish branch of the International Organisation of Good Templars, now called Movendi International. When it was founded in the 19th century, the Templars observed rituals and donned regalia inspired by Freemasonry, with lodges that required passwords to enter. Today, Movendi’s website identifies its “heart-driven” mission as promoting abstinence from alcohol.

Critics of the alcohol industry have also pointed to problematic affiliations on its side. Just as temperance groups like Movendi have sponsored research endeavors, so has the alcohol industry. ([One meta-analysis](#), however, found that industry-funded studies represented a small proportion of the overall alcohol-and-health literature.) In 2018, the National Institutes of Health [canceled](#) a study on alcohol and health after it said that one of the researchers, Harvard’s Dr. Ken Mukamal, had improperly discussed the trial in meetings with alcohol industry stakeholders and signaled that the results would support moderate consumption.

At least six members of Congress have [sent letters](#) to the heads of the federal agencies overseeing the dietary guidelines review, echoing the wine industry’s concerns about the lack of transparency and the subcommittee’s potential for bias. The anti-alcohol camp sees these pleas as further proof that officials “are beholden to the alcohol industry,” just as they are to sellers of sugary beverages and fossil fuels, said Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, research director of San Rafael’s Alcohol Justice, a nonprofit that aims to reduce “the harms associated with populations targeted by the alcohol industry.”

“Legislators are often not making decisions with the health of their constituents in mind,” he said. “They’re making it, at best, with a short-sighted economic model.”

## A conflicting body of scientific research

But what does the science actually say? No one, including the alcohol industry, would argue that excessive drinking is safe. The current debate, instead, is converging on the person who has a glass of Pinot Noir with dinner a few nights a week. Is that red wine protecting them from heart disease, or is it hastening the onset of cancer? With so many accusations of bias against both pro- and anti-alcohol voices, and studies that baldly contradict each other, it can feel impossible to know how to interpret the data about moderate consumption.

“What’s hard about the medical discussion is that it’s very elliptical,” said Karen MacNeil, a wine writer in Napa who is helping to launch a pro-wine campaign called Come Over October, a response to Sober October. “One set of doctors says X, another says Y, and pretty soon consumers are just like, ‘what?’”

The scientific argument in favor of moderate drinking that lodged into the American consciousness is often described as the “J-curve.” Studies that support the J-curve have found that moderate drinkers have lower rates of mortality than both heavy drinkers and nondrinkers. The line on the resulting graph resembles a “J,” with nondrinkers at the short tip of the letter and heavy drinkers at the higher, right-hand point.

### Alcohol's J-curve

Mortality due to any cause

For years, there was wide scientific consensus that moderate alcohol consumption had protective health effects. Many studies have found that people who drink moderately have significantly lower rates of all-cause mortality than heavy drinkers, and also slightly lower rates of all-cause mortality than nondrinkers.

In recent years, more scientists have challenged the validity of these findings. Some have argued, for example, that healthy lifestyle factors correlated with moderate drinkers contribute to their lower mortality rates.

Number of drinks per day

Chart: Erin Caughey / The Chronicle

Famous examples of this phenomenon include the [French Paradox](#) — popularized in a 1991 “60 Minutes” episode — and the Mediterranean diet, both of which suggest that populations that drink wine regularly tend to

live longer, healthier lives. Even with the legal prohibition on alcohol producers making claims about their product's supposed health advantages, the J-curve publicity blitz effectively spoke on their behalf.

Even Stockwell was a J-curve believer in this era. "The jury was in, there were hundreds of studies finding benefits, and it was basically crazy to doubt this," he said. In 2000 he published an article that likened those who denied the J-curve's validity to members of the Flat Earth Society.

But subsequent research that he conducted with a UCSF scientist reversed Stockwell's convictions entirely. After they analyzed previous studies on alcohol and health, he determined that lifestyle factors correlated with drinking habits had skewed earlier data: Some nondrinkers, for example, had quit drinking because they were already ill, which made them look less healthy than moderate drinkers. Stockwell published [these findings](#) in 2006, and in the following years a scientific literature began to develop that found harmful effects from drinking. "Across the people publishing in this area, there's been a big shift in the last 10 years toward skepticism," Stockwell said.

Anti-alcohol groups thought they'd found a smoking gun in a [2018 study published in the Lancet](#) that purported to debunk the J-curve. But a [2022 update](#) to that Lancet report reversed those findings, and new reviews in reputable journals like [Nature Communications](#) continue to support the J-curve. (The J-curve hypothesis has never been subjected to a randomized control study, which would present obvious ethical quandaries.)

While the wine industry continues to promote the J-curve, its opponents are urging people to think more broadly. Benowitz-Fredericks of Alcohol Justice believes that the "hyperfixation on cardiovascular outcomes, which is what the J-curve is all about," neglects to account for other alcohol-related harms — including non-physical outcomes like interpersonal violence and addiction.

Although the current stakes — at least as they relate to the dietary guidelines — appear higher, in some ways the contemporary debate is more nuanced than during previous temperance movements. If the anti-drinking campaigns of the 1980s focused on the catastrophic effects of drunk driving, today researchers like Stockwell are [noting](#) that one drink a day may shorten your total lifespan by about two and a half months. "It is a tiny risk," Stockwell conceded, in his typically gentle register.

There used to be a clear dichotomy, said Benowitz-Fredericks. "You were either an alcoholic or you were a normal drinker." These days, the narrative is more subtle. "Now there's this idea, 'I do feel a little crappier than I should, and what if my alcohol consumption is part of that?'"

Still, the discussion is clearly polarized, with few voices advocating a middle ground. One rare person taking this softer stance is Dr. Laura Catena, who works for her family winery, Argentina's Catena Zapata, and also practiced emergency medicine for 26 years at UCSF.

"I feel very confident saying that alcohol in moderation is health neutral," said Catena, who acknowledges that her ownership in a winery may color her views. According to her review of the research, there's data showing positive health effects (for diabetes, for instance) and data showing negatives (for breast cancer).

But Catena is clear on one point: She believes that the "no safe level" narrative is a misinterpretation. "People are trying to come up with arguments to say there's no safe limit, and that is not legitimate based on the current science," she said. When ICCPUD solicited public comments about its research protocol in July, she submitted a [letter](#), arguing that the proposed methodology was not scientifically valid or transparent and that the risks of bias were not properly identified.

For all its fears, the alcohol industry's worst-case scenario — a 2025 dietary guidelines that echoes the World Health Organization's proclamation — seems unlikely to transpire. "I don't think 'no safe level' is going to happen this year," said Benowitz-Fredericks. A reduction from the current guidance is more probable, he said,

but “I don’t think we’re going to see a giant change in how people think about a given drink.” Changes like labeling reform, which Alcohol Justice would like to see, are a long-term goal: “It took 50 years to get tobacco to do it.”

In the meantime, both the pro- and anti-alcohol camps anxiously await news from the ICCPUD panel’s research, which is supposed to conclude by the end of the year. And voices from both sides insist that they’ll respect whatever the science says — as long as it’s trustworthy.

“Who knows,” said Stockwell. “Maybe I’ll see the light and turn back again.”

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