

Commissioner slams child adverts for sugary products

By Sara Lewis

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EU Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis has hit out at those that advertise high sugar products to children.

Speaking at the Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) conference in Brussels this week he criticised the “so aggressive advertising against children” that he saw promoting sugar. Andriukaitis said it was all for the sake of profit.

The Commissioner also admitted that he never read food labels, telling the conference: “I am a very bad consumer. I never look at the label.”

Andriukaitis outlined how EU food policy had evolved over the years telling the conference: “While fifteen or twenty years ago safety would have been the key concern for many people, matters have moved on since then, with other factors coming ever more to the fore.

People expect and demand not only safe but also nutritious, healthy food produced in a sustainable and ethical manner. And they are sending us sometimes very contradicting signals.”

The Commissioner stressed: “The EU's role goes indeed further than simply ensuring that food is safe. The food that we eat – in terms of composition, quality and quantity – strongly influences our health.”

Insisting that the Commission had “responded to these demands on a number of fronts,” Andriukaitis turned as example to nutrition, which he said was the “centre of attention” for all Europeans. “Each of us, every single day we talk with our friends or families about what we eat, the way we eat it, including how much we ate.

“Nutrition talks are one of our main concerns - and this is also reflected in the media. Unbalanced diets are a major risk factor for overweight and obesity, the health consequences of which are hard to overstate – diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and cancer.”

The Commissioner continued: “So there is a clear need for better diets, and this need has created the basis for a broader European Union nutrition policy under which a series of actions has been developed, legislative and non-legislative.”

Nevertheless, Andriukaitis argued that “nutrition is not a consensual territory. On the legislative side, you are all aware of the difficulties in implementing the Regulation on health and nutrition claims. This Law sets the legal framework for food companies that want to underline particular beneficial properties of their products in relation to health and nutrition.

These rules are designed to help consumers to make healthier choices. Any nutrition or health claim made on a food label or advertising in the European Union must be clear, accurate and based on scientific evidence.”

The Commissioner then flagged up “a major landmark in the EU nutrition policy” the introduction of mandatory nutrition labelling last December under the food information to consumers regulation (FIC – 1169/2011).

He added: “Of course, we also have voluntary labelling tools, for instance on the front pack of food products. On this, I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that I intend to present a report towards the end of this year on the different schemes.”

Andriukaitis went on to promise an EU limit on transfats, telling the conference: “Let me add here that I am committed to establishing limits on trans-fats, as so they increase the risk of heart disease more than any other nutrient.”

The Commissioner added: “A year ago, we concluded in a report that setting an EU-wide legal limit for industrially produced trans-fats would appear to be the most effective solution.

In line with Better Regulation principles, the Commission is now conducting an impact assessment. I hope to be able to act quickly on this.”

Andriukaitis went on to say “Another main issue linked to nutrition is, on the non-legislative side, the reformulation of processed foods. It can help address excessive intakes of energy, saturated fat, sugars and salt in our diets.”

While he noted that the Commission was cooperating with food manufacturers and Member States on reformulation “with a view to improving the overall nutritional quality of processed foods, and of course, to drawing the attention to reformulation issues,” he argued: “We need a stronger EU nutrition policy.”