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Senators sponsor restaurant menu bill focused on prevention

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Three thin and trim senators introduced bipartisan legislation Wednesday to require that chain restaurants print nutrition information on their menus and menu boards. The legislation comes with glowing endorsements not only from a score of major health and nutrition organizations but also from Darden Restaurants, Dunkin Donuts and the National Restaurant Association.

Co-sponsor Tom Harkin (D-IA) explained that restaurateurs welcome the bill since it would give consumers valuable information and establish a national standard to replace the confusion of different requirements in different states.



L. to R., Senators Tom Carper (D-DE), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and Tom Harkin (D-IA) introduce their bipartisan compromise legislation Wednesday to require health information on chain restaurant menus. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Harkin pointed out that the menu labeling compromise will be part of the prevention and public health title of the health reform legislation which is a top administration priority. In introducing the bill, he said “The individual and societal costs of poor nutrition and diet-related chronic disease compel us to take concrete steps to fashion a society in which the healthy choice is the easy choice, and in which prevention always comes before treatment. The menu labeling agreement reached this week will not only help consumers to make informed decisions about their health when eating out, but is a critical part of a broader re-orientation to a society of prevention and health promotion.”

Senator Tom Carper (D-DE) explained that “Obesity is a growing problem in our nation where more than one in three Americans are overweight. With our busy lifestyles and more Americans eating out, diners need easy access to nutritional information. Our menu labeling compromise is a common-sense solution that provides consumers with the tools and resources they need to make healthier decisions when eating out.”

The bill’s third sponsor, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), said “Today, America is facing an obesity epidemic which must be addressed at the national level. It’s been nearly 20 years since Congress enacted legislation that requires all packaged foods to include nutrition information. However, there is not a comparable national standard for prepared foods. This compromise will allow Americans to be informed about the nutrition content of their foods prior to the point of purchase. This will include calorie information on the menu board at both fast food establishments as well as at sit-down restaurants.”

Under the agreement, restaurants that are part of a chain with 20 or more locations doing business under the same name would be required to disclose:

- On the menu or menu board, the number of calories per menu item;
- In a written form, available immediately to consumers upon request, additional nutrition information, including total calories and calories from fat, and amounts of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, complex carbohydrates, sugars, dietary fiber and protein.

The agreement also requires the disclosure of calories per food items on vending machines owned by individuals operating 20 or more vending machines. The bill would not require individually owned restaurants or “mom and pop” operations to disclose nutritional information

The bill’s supporters include the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Diabetes Association, American Dietetic Association, Brinker International, California Center for Public Health Advocacy, Center for Science in the Public Interest, The Coalition for Responsible Nutrition Information, Darden Restaurants, Dunkin Donuts, the National Restaurant Association, The Nemours Foundation in Delaware, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University and Joseph W. Thompson, MD, MPH, Surgeon General, State of Arkansas.