

Will Congress force this controversial alcohol study to stop?

Members of Congress are calling for a suspension of a controversial committee that could recommend that Americans reduce their alcohol consumption.

For months, alcohol industry voices have expressed concerns that scientists on this committee — part of the review process for the upcoming revision of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines — have demonstrated biases against alcohol, which they say could render any recommendations they make untrustworthy.

Now, it appears that a sizable number of U.S. representatives agree. “There’s a strong feeling among my colleagues that this is a concern,” Rep. Mike Thompson, whose Northern California district includes Napa County, told the Chronicle. Last week, he co-wrote a letter to the heads of two federal agencies asking for the alcohol-review committee to be suspended. It was signed by 113 of his Congressional colleagues.

“When these studies are undertaken, they need to be done in an open transparent process, and I don’t think you stack the deck,” Thompson said. But in this case, he wrote in the letter, the scientists on the committee in question “were not appropriately vetted for conflicts of interest.”

Thompson’s letter is a significant development in what has become the major issue looming over the beleaguered wine industry this year. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines is due for a review in 2025, an effort for which Congress appropriated \$1.3 million. For this revision, federal agencies instituted an unprecedented extra step. In addition to the typical review by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services commissioned a study to look at alcohol consumption specifically. This second study falls under the purview of the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD).

One of Congress’ concerns with this set-up is the redundancy of having two separate studies. “We’re paying twice for it,” said Thompson. Moreover, he said, the ICCPUD committee — unlike the standard process undertaken by the National Academies — is not accountable to Congress. “This duplicative study has been commissioned without any Congressional input, without transparency, without any type of public knowledge or vetting of the board members,” he said.

All six scientists on the ICCPUD committee are experts in substance use disorders, which has drawn criticism from wine industry advocates. They argue that any study of alcohol consumption should include input from cardiologists and other experts who can examine alcohol's effects beyond just chronic use. Some members of the panel have also received funding from anti-alcohol groups.

Thompson characterized the ICCPUD panel as “secretive,” and it’s worth noting that even some anti-alcohol groups have objected to the lack of transparency around the committee’s formation and its work. The possibility of bias informing public policy, Thompson said, “should concern everybody, be it on alcohol consumption, egg consumption or sun consumption.”

The 2025 Dietary Guidelines update is drawing particular scrutiny because it is unfolding amid a shifting global sentiment toward drinking. Last year, the World Health Organization declared that there was “no safe level” of alcohol consumption. Although it appears unlikely that the American guidelines will go so far as to mirror that advisory exactly, there’s a widespread sense that the ICCPUD panel might find the current levels of consumption considered safe by the U.S. Dietary Guidelines — up to two drinks a day for men and one for women — excessive.

Of course, Thompson and some of his fellow representatives have their own reasons to push back against a process that could result in negative effects to the wine industry. His district includes the most famous wine region in the country, and his co-author on last week’s letter, Dan Newhouse, represents a major wine region in Washington, the Yakima Valley.

Still, Thompson said that gathering 113 signatures on short notice, during a time when Congress’ attention was primarily directed toward avoiding a government shutdown, was “pretty spectacular.” Now, he waits for a response from Secretary of Agriculture Thomas J. Vilsack and Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra.

“We went through this in the 1990s, where there was a very aggressive effort by the anti-alcohol community,” Thompson said. “A lot of that was dampened because of scientific evidence that suggested that they were off-base. So these things never go away.”

Will Congress force this controversial alcohol study to stop?

Esther Mobley, October 17