

Minister of Health



Ministre de la Santé

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0K9

Mr. Bill Casey, MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Health  
The House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A4

Dear Mr. Casey:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to respond, on behalf of the Government of Canada, to the 18th Report of the Standing Committee on Health (Committee), entitled Report *on Highly Sweetened Pre-mixed Alcoholic Beverages*.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I commend the members of the Committee for undertaking this study, and thank the witnesses who provided their valuable expertise through testimony and those individuals and organizations who submitted written briefs outlining their perspectives on this topic. The Government of Canada agrees with the spirit and intent of the Committee's recommendations.

This study indicates the clear desire for a national conversation on how best to address alcohol-related harms. Alcohol consumption in Canada is higher than the global average. One-fifth of Canadians who consume alcohol do so at rates above Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines. Rates of drinking among high school students have been increasing in Canada, and alcohol remains the substance with the highest prevalence of use by Canadian students in grades 7 to 12.

These high consumption rates are leading to many increased alcohol-related harms. The Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines indicate that drinking more than four standard drinks for men or three for women in an occasion increases the risk for short-term injury and harm and that drinking more than 15 drinks a week for men or 10 a week for women increases the risk for long-term negative impacts on health. In Canada, alcohol results in more hospitalizations than heart attack and deaths resulting from alcohol consumption, including alcohol poisonings, are on the rise. Furthermore, despite efforts to prevent drinking during pregnancy and impaired driving, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and driving while under the influence of alcohol remain issues of concern.

The Government of Canada recognizes the immediate potential dangers posed by large-volume single-serve containers of highly sweetened, flavoured alcoholic beverages, and is taking action to help protect Canadians. Following the tragic death of Athena Gervais in March 2018, Health

../2

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Canada moved swiftly to publish a Notice of Intent to amend the *Food and Drug Regulations* to restrict the amount of alcohol in these beverages. Health Canada sought additional comments from key stakeholders on a revised proposal in June and July 2018, and will be seeking to advance regulations, supported by a cost-benefit analysis, in the coming months.

Addressing problematic alcohol use is complex because of the multiple jurisdictions involved and the shared responsibility with provinces and territories in this area. However, the Government of Canada is committed to addressing alcohol-related harms more broadly through a collaborative, compassionate, and evidence-based public health approach. In December 2016, the Government introduced the Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (CDSS) as the new public health approach to addressing illegal and legal problematic substance use, including alcohol. The CDSS formally restores harm reduction as a key pillar alongside the existing pillars of prevention, treatment, and enforcement.

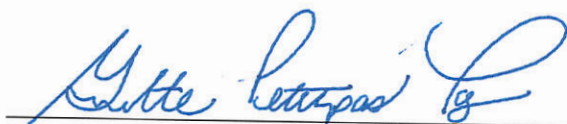
It is essential that policies under the CDSS are based on a strong foundation of evidence. To this end, the Government has launched public consultations on the CDSS. Through these consultations, the Government will work with the public and key stakeholders to ensure that future actions to address alcohol-related risks and harms are aligned with latest evidence and best practices. The Government will closely consider the Committee's recommendations as part of these efforts.

Efforts to date under the 2007 National Alcohol Strategy and the CDSS have helped to address the harms related to alcohol use in Canada. Many of the recommendations proposed in the NAS have been implemented or are currently in progress; however, the NAS is outdated and no longer reflects latest Canadian data regarding alcohol use. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) has already begun working with partners to update the NAS, a process through which issues such as the physical availability of alcohol; underage drinking; pricing mechanisms and other incentives; advertising and promotion; and labelling will be examined.

These actions highlight the Government's commitment not only to addressing the health and safety risks of highly sweetened, flavoured alcoholic beverages in the short term, but to addressing broader alcohol-related risks and harms through a long-term, evidence-based approach.

I thank you for highlighting the importance of this issue by tabling these recommendations. Please see the annex following this letter for more detailed information on how the Government intends to address these recommendations. This Report will be invaluable in sparking a national dialogue on how to address alcohol-related harms in Canada.

Yours sincerely,



The Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Health

## Annex

### ***Restrictions on the Alcohol, Sugar and Caffeine Content in Highly Sweetened Pre-mixed Alcoholic Beverages (Recommendations 1, 2, 3)***

Health Canada is seeking to advance regulations in the coming months which would restrict the amount of alcohol in single-serve containers of highly sweetened alcoholic beverages. The report's recommendations, as well as feedback received during Health Canada's consultations, are being taken into consideration in the development of the regulations.

### ***Labelling, Packaging, Marketing and Branding (Recommendations 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)***

The Government has launched a public consultation on the CDSS to identify concrete future actions to address problematic substance use and to ensure future actions to address alcohol-related risks and harms are aligned with latest evidence and best practices. The Government anticipates that the consultative process will include discussions on labelling, packaging, marketing and advertising practices of alcohol. The Government will consider all of the feedback received from stakeholders and the public on this issue, as well as HESA's recommendations, as efforts continue to identify future actions to address alcohol-related harms.

The CRTC is an independent administrative tribunal and the Government does not currently have plans to direct the Commission to review its Code for broadcast advertising of alcoholic beverages and whether it should apply to digital media. However, on June 5, 2018, the Departments of Canadian Heritage and Innovation, Science and Economic Development announced the launch of the review of the Broadcasting Act and the Telecommunications Act. The review will help ensure that Canada's communications legislation is modernized and that Canadians can take full advantage of the digital age. The panel's final report and recommendations, which are expected to be available by January 31, 2020, will inform any eventual changes to the legislative and regulatory framework.

### ***Pricing and Taxation (Recommendation 12, 13)***

As announced in Budget 2017, the Government increased the excise duties on beer, wine and spirits by two per cent in 2017. Going forward, the rates of excise duty on alcoholic beverages will be adjusted annually every April 1 based on changes to the Consumer Price Index. Provinces and territories are responsible for regulating the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages in their jurisdictions, which includes the authority to establish pricing, and also impose taxes and mark-ups on alcoholic beverages.

The Government anticipates that the CDSS consultative process will include discussions on the pricing mechanisms and other incentives. The Government will consider all of the feedback received from stakeholders and the public on this issue, as well as HESA's recommendations, during the policy development process.

### ***Monitoring and Surveillance (Recommendation 14)***

Health Canada is working with partners towards establishing a Canadian Drugs Observatory, which would provide factual, objective information about drugs and related substances,

including alcohol, at a national level. This observatory would be the central focal point for information on both licit and illicit drugs and would integrate information coming from a wide range of national, provincial and more targeted sources.

***National Alcohol Strategy (Recommendation 15)***

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction has already begun working with partners to update the National Alcohol Strategy.

Issues such as the physical availability of alcohol; underage drinking; pricing mechanisms and other incentives; advertising and promotion; and labelling will be examined as part of this process and the information gathered could inform the Government's future work.