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Australia's Health Star Rating Faces Uptake Challenges

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Australia, More than a decade after its launch, the nation's voluntary Health Star Rating system is struggling to achieve widespread use. The scheme, introduced in 2014 to help consumers compare the nutritional quality of packaged foods, assigns ratings from 0.5 to 5 stars.

Despite its intention to provide simple, front-of-pack guidance, uptake remains low. Government data shows that as of November 2024, only 35% of intended products in Australia displayed the rating, with New Zealand showing a similar rate of 33%. This falls well short of the final voluntary target of 70% by November 2025, and experts warn the goal is unlikely to be met.

“Voluntary uptake has failed,” said Dr Alexandra Jones, Head of Food Governance at The George Institute for Global Health. “The rating is too often used selectively for marketing purposes rather than as a consistent consumer guide.”

The imbalance is evident in industry behaviour. Research indicates that products with higher star ratings are far more likely to carry the label, while items scoring lower tend to omit it. This selective approach, critics argue, undermines the system's credibility.

A 2019 review confirmed that although shoppers understood the label, its limited presence across supermarket shelves restricted meaningful product comparisons. Governments in both Australia and New Zealand responded by setting phased uptake targets, but progress has since stalled.

In July 2024, Food Ministers directed Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) to prepare for mandatory adoption should industry fall short of the final target. A spokesperson for FSANZ confirmed that groundwork is underway: “If voluntary targets are not met, preparatory work will enable an efficient process to incorporate the Health Star Rating system into the Food Standards Code.”

The algorithm behind the label rewards positive elements such as protein, fibre, and fruit or vegetable content, while deducting points for sugar, saturated fat, and salt. Manufacturers calculate the score using nutrition panel data and can choose whether or not to display the star rating.

Public health organisations argue that this voluntary approach has outlived its usefulness. “Australians want transparent and consistent information about the foods they choose,” said Dietitians Australia CEO Magriet Raxworthy. “Mandating the system would remove inconsistencies and support healthier decisions.”

Recent polling reflects strong community backing, with more than 80% of consumers supporting compulsory Health Star Ratings. Advocates point to similar success in other labelling reforms, noting that once mandated, industry adapts quickly.

After a decade of voluntary operation, the debate now centres on whether political leaders will take the next step. Experts argue that only mandatory adoption will deliver the consistency needed for the Health Star Rating to become a trusted tool for nutrition across Australia and New Zealand.