

Date: 8 April 2026

Ms. Mia Bonta
Chair, Committee on Health
California State Assembly

Mr. Phillip Chen
Vice-Chair, Committee on Health
California State Assembly

Subject: Position Letter on A.B. No. 2244 “California Certified Food Standard”

*Dear Ms. Mia Bonta,
Dear Mr. Phillip Chen,
Dear Members of the Health Committee,*

On behalf of Competere – Policies for Sustainable Development, an independent European policy institute promoting innovation, free trade, and balanced lifestyles from a classical liberal perspective, I would like to contribute to your reflection on the AB-2244 “California Certified” food standard.

We commend the attention devoted to addressing obesity, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which are increasingly affecting California and the United States, particularly among younger generations. This is part of a broader global trend that Europe is also experiencing.

However, we would like to highlight a fundamental concern at the core of the proposal.

The proposed “California Certified” seal relies on the concept of “ultra-processed foods” (UPFs), which does not rest on a clear or universally accepted scientific definition. UPFs remain an evolving and heterogeneous category, combining elements related to ingredients, nutrient thresholds, and processing techniques, and are interpreted differently across jurisdictions. As such, they risk functioning more as a descriptive or ideological classification than as a robust tool to identify health risk.

Building labeling or certification schemes on this basis raises concerns not only about scientific validity, but also about effectiveness, particularly as similar front-of-pack approaches have shown limited impact on obesity and public health outcomes, while introducing broader policy risks.

First, it conflates processing with nutritional quality, despite the absence of a clear causal relationship. Foods with very different nutritional profiles may be treated similarly, while products with comparable health impacts may be treated differently.

Second, it introduces regulatory uncertainty. The reliance on evolving criteria and future determinations (“foods of concern”) creates instability for producers, retailers, and certification bodies.

Third, it risks penalizing safe and widely used ingredients, as well as technological processes essential for food safety, preservation, accessibility, and quality.



More broadly, this approach risks oversimplifying a complex reality. Obesity, CVDs, and NCDs are multifactorial conditions, driven by a combination of dietary patterns, physical activity, genetics, metabolism, microbiome, socioeconomic and behavioral factors, and broader lifestyles. Food is only one component.

At the same time, increasing evidence suggests that modern lifestyles, particularly digital environments, play a growing role in shaping health outcomes. Sedentary behavior, screen exposure, sleep disruption, and attention patterns influence energy balance and long-term health. We have explored this dimension in our work on “Ultra-Scrolling Social,” which we are pleased to share as a complementary perspective. If policy attention focuses on what is on the plate, it should also address what shapes behavior beyond it.

Focusing predominantly on categorizing products risks diverting attention from these broader determinants of health. It also promotes a reductionist view of nutrition, where foods or ingredients are implicitly labeled as “good” or “bad,” “genuine” or “industrial,” “real” or “artificial.”

There is no scientific basis to demonize processing or specific ingredients, per se. What matters are portion, frequency, variety, and overall dietary and lifestyle patterns. Effective policies should work with citizens and industry to improve these dimensions, while encouraging quality, transparency, and innovation.

Similarly, categories such as “hyper-palatable foods” remain scientifically contested and do not provide a reliable foundation for regulatory intervention.

Evidence from various jurisdictions suggests that simplified policy tools linked to these classifications, such as front-of-pack labeling schemes, fiscal measures, or restrictive approaches, have delivered insignificant results in reducing obesity, while generating unintended consequences, including higher consumer costs, market distortions, and reduced freedom of choice, often accompanied by a decline in consumer awareness.

Experiences in Europe with interpretative and prescriptive labeling systems, such as Nutri-Score and traffic-light schemes, have not translated into measurable improvements in obesity or cardiovascular outcomes, despite influencing purchasing behavior in certain contexts. Similar patterns have been observed in Latin America with warning labels. While some government evaluations indicate shifts in consumption, these have not translated into measurable improvements in weight reduction or reductions in NCDs. A more comprehensive assessment of these policies, including their unintended consequences, would provide a more accurate understanding of their overall effectiveness and potential risks.

A more effective approach requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all frameworks and avoiding rigid certification schemes based on unstable definitions. The guiding principle should be balance.

Balance, understood as a combination of diverse foods, appropriate portions and frequency, active lifestyles, and informed choices, has long been at the core of successful dietary models such as the Mediterranean diet. This is not a prescriptive list of ingredients or recipes, but a lifestyle approach rooted in moderation, diversity, and cultural context, adaptable across different culinary traditions, including in the United States.

In this respect, California, with its climate, agricultural diversity, and cultural openness, is particularly well positioned to promote a model based on balance rather than prescriptive or paternalistic approaches.

Rather than discouraging specific foods or ingredients through classifications, taxation, or certification schemes, policies should foster knowledge and responsibility. This includes enabling informed consumer choices and engaging the industry in a continuous effort to improve ingredient quality and product composition. As consumers become more aware and demand higher standards,



companies are naturally incentivized to respond, creating a virtuous cycle between informed consumers and a responsive industry.

This dynamic has long been observed in Mediterranean countries, where food culture, consumer awareness, and industry practices evolve together, promoting quality and balance without relying on prescriptive or restrictive measures.

We would therefore encourage a more comprehensive and adaptive policy approach, grounded in clear and evidence-based principles, focused on:

- Education and consumer empowerment
- Integration of physical activity and lifestyle factors into prevention strategies
- Support for innovation, including personalized nutrition and digital health tools

California has the opportunity to lead by example, advancing a model that empowers citizens rather than constraining choice. Ensuring scientific robustness, regulatory clarity, and proportionality will be essential.

We remain at your disposal for any further contribution or exchange.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Michele Carruba – Head of the Scientific Committee

Prof. Pietro Paganini – President and Curiosity Officer

About Competere

We are an independent advocacy group working to advance innovation, free trade, and individual freedom through evidence-based public policies, grounded in the liberal tradition of critical thinking, open markets, and personal responsibility.

We combine scientific evidence with an experimental, liberal approach to support effective and forward-looking solutions to today's policy challenges.