

Subject:           Labelling for wine bottles with cork stoppers

Cork is a natural product that is 100% biodegradable and recyclable. Historically it has been the preferred product used for sealing bottles, especially wine bottles. In recent years, cork stoppers have faced competition on the market from alternative stoppers with a demonstrably less favourable ecological balance sheet. Recent studies have confirmed the environmental advantages of cork stoppers by comparison with plastic stoppers and aluminium caps, and it is estimated that the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions they release into the atmosphere in the course of their life cycle are between 10 and 25 times lower.

Cork oak groves and forests provide invaluable environmental benefits since they are biodiversity hotspots, as can be seen from their designation as a natural habitat of Community importance (Directive 92/43/EEC)<sup>1</sup>, and they play a key role in water regulation and soil conservation, something which has been lent added importance in view of the risks of desertification. Furthermore, a highly specialised workforce is employed in cork extraction, and this activity is thought to have a minimal impact on the carbon stock in these forest systems.

Processing cork into stoppers represents around 70% of the total value of the cork market and therefore plays a crucial role in preserving the economic value of cork oak groves and forests, and ultimately the viability of the related ecosystems themselves.

At present, when buying a bottle of wine, it is not possible to tell what type of stopper it has, even though the available alternatives represent quite distinct options for the consumer, with an environmental impact that also differs considerably. Information of this kind is vital so that consumers can exercise their right to choose, and it may also help establish more environmentally friendly patterns of consumption.

Given that, thanks to cork, the European Union leads the world market in wine stoppers, the life cycle of cork stoppers performs important environmental, social and economic functions and, in view of the alternatives, cork stoppers represent an ecologically responsible choice for consumers, and bearing in mind the need to promote the competitiveness and sustainability of forestry industries and their strategic role in mitigating the effects of climate change, as well as the need to promote environmentally responsible consumption, can the Commission develop a labelling system within the framework of the World Trade Organisation that will make it possible to distinguish what type of stopper wine bottles are sealed with?

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<sup>1</sup> OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.