

# *E.U. Says Veggie Burgers Can Keep Their Name*

The European Parliament voted on Friday on proposals that would have banned products without meat from being labeled burgers or sausages.



By Isabella Kwai

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LONDON — When is a burger not a burger? When it contains no meat. At least according to a divisive proposal that was in front of the European Parliament this week, part of a set of measures that would have banned the use of terms like “steak,” “sausage,” “escallop” or “burger” on labels for plant-based alternative products.

But after a decisive vote against the measure on Friday, it seems veggie burgers will still be on the menu.

“Reason prevailed, and climate sinners lost,” Nikolaj Villumsen, a member of the European Parliament from Denmark posted on Twitter. “It’s worth celebrating with a veggie burger.”

A proposal to expand a ban on descriptions such as “yogurt-style” or “cream imitation” for nondairy replacements did pass, extending previous limitations on the use of words like “milk” and “butter” on nondairy alternatives.

The proposed changes — a small part of a package of agricultural measures — received more attention than perhaps desired either by their proponents among meat and livestock groups, who said they would prefer to focus on helping farmers work sustainably, or the environmentalists and food manufacturers opposing it, for whom it is a distraction from climate-change policy.

Jasmijn de Boo, vice president of ProVeg International, a group aimed at reducing meat consumption, said that the proposal was not in the interest of consumers or manufacturers, and that shoppers were not confused by the labels currently on store shelves.

“Why change something to a ‘veggie disc’ or ‘tube’ instead of a sausage?” she said. “It’s ridiculous.”

Those in favor of the change said that labeling plant-based products with meat terms were misleading and could open the door for other confusing labels.

“We simply call for the work of millions of European farmers and livestock sector workers to be acknowledged and respected,” Jean-Pierre Fleury, the chairman of Copa-Cogeca, Europe’s largest farming lobby group, said in a statement this month. He described the use of meatlike names for plant-based products as “cultural hijacking.”

The decision is a victory for environmental advocates over an E.U. farming lobby that is one of the strongest voices in the bloc and plays an outsized role in policymaking, considering that the sector has been shrinking for years.

Camille Perrin, the senior food policy officer at the European Consumer Organization, called the decision “great news” and a “common sense” vote.

“Consumers are in no way confused by a soy steak or chickpea-based sausage, so long as it is clearly labeled as vegetarian or vegan,” she said in a statement after the vote. “Terms such as ‘burger’ or ‘steak’ on plant-based items simply make it much easier for consumers to know how to integrate these products within a meal.”

It is not the first debate over plant-based foods as that sector has exploded in recent years.

Labels for plant-based dairy alternatives like “soy milk” or “tofu butter” are illegal in the bloc after dairy producers won a 2017 ruling backed by the European Court of Justice.

In 2018, France banned the use of meat terms to describe vegetarian products. In dozens of states in the United States, advocates of vegetarian food have clashed with farmers and lobbyists over legislation that makes it illegal for plant-based products to be called meat.

Several parties in the European Parliament had also submitted proposals with different caveats since the initial amendment was introduced, and those are still to be voted on. Manufacturers like Beyond Meat, Unilever and Ikea, along with the European Medical Association, have opposed the changes, which they described in an open letter as “disproportionate and out of step with the current climate.”

Many said that approving the amendment would be counter to a goal set by the European Parliament this month to reduce carbon emissions 60 percent by 2030.

And shoppers seem to like the names. In a 2020 survey from the European Consumer Organization, about 42 percent of respondents said they believed “meaty” names for plant-based products should be permitted if products were clearly labeled vegetarian or vegan. Twenty-five percent said that such names should be banned.

A spokesman for Copa-Cogeca said the organization did not believe that shoppers could not tell the difference between meat and plant-based products, and said that farmers were not against vegetable alternatives. But he said that differentiating the markets — much like those of butter and margarine — was among a host of initiatives that would support struggling farmers who are trying to adapt to a world more focused on sustainability.

Some said the proposal would provide more fodder for what critics call the European Union’s penchant for overregulation. Alexander Stubb, a former prime minister of Finland, said the bloc should legislate only “where there are impediments to the free movement of goods, services, money and people.”

He described the amendment as “overkill” that would bolster the arguments of those who campaigned for Britain’s exit from the bloc: “This is one of these symbolic sad cases — a bit like legislating on the curve of cucumbers.”

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