



Alternatives North

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Alternatives North Sugar-sweetened Beverage Tax submission

Canada's Food Guide 2019 states on the cover page: "Make water your beverage of choice."
(<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en>)

It goes on to note: "Food choices are not simply a matter of personal choice. Many factors influence the food choices individuals make. The interpersonal, social, economic and physical environments all play a powerful role in shaping the capacity to make healthy eating choices."
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/food-nutrition/evidence-review-dietary-guidance-summary-results-implications-canada-food-guide.html#s3-1>)

Alternatives North¹ agrees that water should be northerners' preferred beverage and we should do what we can to encourage this healthy choice. Limiting sugar-sweetened drinks is part of the solution to NWT health concerns such as oral health issues, type 2 diabetes, and obesity; it is an important step towards improved overall health. We need to encourage a culture where sugary beverages are an occasional treat, rather than part of a daily diet and part of our culture. It is essential to note that an overall plan for healthy living is required.

However, we also note that a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages will have proportionally more impact on lower income people. While supporting the tax, we also believe that the GNWT needs to do much more to reduce poverty in the NWT. We have several recommendations to make in regard to a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages if it is introduced:

1. **Substantive tax:** A tax rate of 20% is the amount considered necessary to deter purchase. We suggest that a flat tax of this amount be used and that it should be based

¹ Alternatives North is an NWT volunteer organization advocating for social, environmental and economic justice. Within our ranks are representatives of churches, labour unions, environmental organizations, women and family advocates and anti-poverty groups. Individual citizens are important participants in our work.

on the size of the container, similar to what is calculated for recycling bottles. The amount should be based on cost of items in Yellowknife so that remote communities are not more impacted.

2. **Revenue to healthy food:** Revenue from the tax should be used to off-set costs of healthy foods, or go to community-based food gathering or gardening projects. The focus should be to off-set the high cost of healthy diets for people who have low incomes as well as in our most remote communities. Any subsidy to healthy food should not be “clawed back” by income assistance programs.
3. **Continue healthy lifestyle initiatives:** We appreciate that a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages is not an answer in and of itself to complex health issues such as obesity, diabetes and poor oral health. GNWT should continue to provide education around, and incentives for, exercise, community and social links, and healthy foods. These initiatives, however, should not be limited to one department. Many divisions, across many departments, could be incorporating healthy lifestyles messaging into their work, directly or indirectly. For example, the new Career Education Advisors (ECE) could incorporate the importance of healthy lifestyles into their work in schools.
4. **Water as cultural imperative:** Most northerners appreciate the bounty of our water, and want to maintain its quality and quantity. Not surprisingly, this is prominent in many modern treaties. We need to go back to relying on water in our day-to-day lives, knowing this is an important part of who we are and how we relate to the land. And, beyond culture, clean drinking water is a human right². We don’t need packaged bottles of tea, or even single-serving bottles of water. We need to continue to have good water in our municipal water supplies and on the land. Easy access to drinking water in all government building and schools with water fountains and reusable water bottle refill stations would help as well.
5. **Lead by example:** GNWT should lead by example and remove the sale of all sugar-sweetened drinks from its office buildings. It could even go so far as adopting a no-sugar-sweetened-drinks policy as it does for alcohol. Finally, an internal campaign to encourage healthy lifestyles amongst GNWT employees could also be considered.
6. **Tracking and Reassessment:** The quantity of sales and consumption should be tracked before and after the tax is introduced. The tax be reassessed after three years and if it is not found to be significantly effective in reducing the intake of sugary drinks as intended, it should be removed.

It appears that much of the opposition to this tax is that it will not do much for lowering rates of obesity. Since we have such poor oral health in the NWT, as well as such high rates of type 2 diabetes, these may be more urgent predictors than obesity reduction.

² Recognized as a human right by the United Nations General Assembly July 2010. "The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses." (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)

Sadly, it is our children and youth who are often targets of sugar-sweetened beverage advertising campaigns. Large corporations spend vast amounts of money encouraging a life-long habit of consuming such beverages. This tax is a small step to countering that unnecessary and unhealthy pattern prompted by advertising.

As GNWT notes, it is not certain that this tax will have long-term effects on reducing sugar-sweetened drinks. However, as with other taxes (e.g., tobacco), this one needs to be implemented in conjunction with education with the aim of changing societal norms.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer input into this proposed tax.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Suzette Montreuil".

Suzette Montreuil
For Alternatives North

