Calorie counts to begin showing up pretty much everywhere By McClatchy Washington Bureau, 12.04.14

WASHINGTON — If you ever wondered how fattening that supersized soft drink or box of popcorn is, in about a year, food sellers will have to tell you.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced on Tuesday that more places have to label their food and beverages with calorie information. Included in the guidelines will be large chain restaurants, amusement parks and movie theaters. Even supermarkets and convenience stores that serve prepared dishes must disclose how many calories they contain.

The new guidelines will apply to chains with more than 20 locations. These include bakeries, cafeterias, coffee shops and snack shops in places like bowling alleys. Ice cream shops, mall cookie vendors, candy stores, table-service restaurants and take-outs like pizza parlors also fall under the new rules.

Posted signs must notify customers that additional nutritional information would be given upon request. The additional information would include things like sodium, sugar, fat and cholesterol content.

Alcoholic drinks on menus or menu boards must also be labeled under the FDA rules.

Coming To A Vending Machine Near You

The new guidelines were required by the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which expanded health care coverage in the United States. They will take effect on Dec. 1, 2015.

Vending machine operators will face similar FDA calorie labeling rules and will have to post the number of calories for each item they sell. These must be clearly stated on a sign that is inside or next to the vending machine. The vending machine rules take effect a year later, on Dec. 1, 2016.

The new rules were made public Tuesday in the Federal Register, which publishes government documents. They are so complicated that it takes 525 pages to explain them.

The guidelines are designed to give consumers additional information to help them make more informed and healthy nutritional choices.

Empowering A Chubby Nation

Americans spend nearly half their food money on food bought outside the home. This kind of prepared food makes up one-third of their caloric intake, according to the FDA. Two-thirds of adults and one-third of children in the United States are either overweight or obese. However, many consumers simply do not know or underestimate the amount of calories these foods provide.

Public health advocates hailed the new rules as an important step toward greater consumer empowerment and a healthier nation.
“These regulations are an achievement for public health,” said Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association. Benjamin also called them "a positive step toward fighting the high chronic disease rates that plague our nation."

By mandating the nutritional information, "consumers will have the information they need to make healthier, more educated decisions about their food choices when eating outside the home," he said.

Dawn Sweeney, president of the National Restaurant Association, said the new rules will make nutritional information available in 200,000 restaurants nationwide.

“We believe that the Food and Drug Administration has positively addressed the areas of greatest concern with the proposed regulations," Sweeney wrote.

“We look forward to working with the agency as the implementation period begins and toward helping the industry adjust to the new rules,” she said.

**Grocery Stores Ask "Why Us?"

In 1990, the federal Nutrition Labeling and Education Act required nutrition information be provided on most foods. Restaurants, vending machines and other prepared foods were exempted from the law. In the years since, state and local governments created their own labeling requirements, which were inconsistent. The new FDA rules “will help avoid situations in which a chain restaurant subject to the federal requirements has to meet different requirements in different states,” the FDA wrote in a statement.

But some observers felt the new measures were tougher than expected. Peter J. Larkin, the president and CEO of the National Grocers Association (NGA), said the new rules were never intended to include grocery stores.

“Grocery stores are not chain restaurants,” Larkin wrote, adding that was why grocery stores were not originally included in the 1990 law.

Larkin wrote the association is "disappointed" that the FDA’s final rules includes grocery stories. He said they would impose "a large and costly" burden on grocery store owners. "NGA will continue to work with Congress to pass bipartisan legislation to address this regulatory overreach,” he wrote.

**It Will Be Expensive**

The FDA estimates the vending machine rules will cost operators $37.9 million over the next 20 years.

Carla Balakgie, the president and CEO of the National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA), said the group’s 1,500 member companies accepted the rules.

“Throughout the process, NAMA has worked with the FDA and Congress to increase their understanding of the relevant challenges faced by small-business owners,” Balakgie said. She said she appreciates that the vending machine industry is being given a longer period to post the signs.