Alcohol Healthwatch Media Release

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**Alcohol consumption decline little more than a drop in the bucket, says Alcohol Healthwatch**

Alcohol Healthwatch Director Rebecca Williams says figures released by Statistics NZ yesterday showing a 2 percent decline in alcohol availability are positive, but that New Zealand still has a long way to go in terms of reducing heavy drinking.

The figures show the total volume of alcohol available for consumption was 457 million litres in the year ending December 2014. This represents a decline from the most recent peak in 2008, where the volume was close to 500 million litres, but reflects an increase compared to 2000 where the measure was closer to 400 million litres.

“While most population groups have reduced their levels of harmful drinking, 15 percent of Kiwis continue to consume at ‘hazardous’ levels, considerably increasing their risk of harming themselves and others. Thirty three percent of 18-24 year olds continue to drink in this manner.

"The Ministry of Health has previously reported that around half of all alcohol consumed is consumed in heavy drinking occasions, so we need to do a lot better than a 2 percent reduction. It’s just a drop in a big bucket, really. Large groups of New Zealanders are drinking significant amounts of alcohol, resulting in between 800-1000 deaths each year and costing the country an estimated $13.7 million a day in social costs.

“The Ministry of Health’s 2015 Alcohol Use survey shows that 50 percent of drinkers drank to intoxication at least once in the past year – equating to 1,418,000 drinkers. This proportion is higher among younger age groups, for example 80 percent for those aged 20-24 years and 68 percent for those aged 15-19 years.”

Williams says the increase in the volume of lower strength beers is possibly a sign that the market is responding to demand from more moderate drinkers who want to stay under the new blood/breath alcohol limits or are more health conscious.

However, the increase in availability of both higher strength beers and wine reflects a more concerning trend, and Williams suggests these higher strength products are more likely to be the beverages of choice for those drinking to intoxication.

“If we’re going to maintain meaningful reductions in harmful drinking and further break down hard core hazardous drinking, we’ll need to do more than we’re doing. Effective implementation of the new alcohol laws and restricting alcohol advertising and sponsorship – as recommended recently by the Ministerial Forum – would be an excellent start.

“Research is very clear that increasing the price of alcohol and restricting the number of outlets is also very effective, so these approaches should also remain firmly on the public health agenda.”

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