Consumers Union
Nonprofit Publisher of Consumer Reports

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Re: *Energy Star Residential Refrigerators and Freezers Version 5.0 Specification Framework Document*

Via Electronic Submission
appliances@energystar.gov

I. Introduction

Consumers Union,[1] the nonprofit publisher of *Consumer Reports*®, appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the Environment Protection Agency's (EPA) and Energy Star's Version 5.0 Framework for Energy Star Residential Refrigerators and Freezers. Consumers Union believes that it is important to continually evaluate and update the Energy Star criteria for refrigerators and freezers to ensure that the Energy Star qualified products are more cost-saving and energy efficient than non-qualified products.

Consumer Reports® rates residential refrigerators and freezers based on several factors, including energy efficiency. Energy efficiency is measured by the electricity consumption, based on tests from our labs, per cubic foot of measured usable storage space. We also publish the estimated annual energy cost based on the current year's average national electricity rate.

II. Improvements Should be Made to Testing Criteria

Consumers Union agrees that the current method for updating and strengthening Energy Star criteria for refrigerators is unlikely to advance Energy Star's goal of helping consumers identify the top 25 efficient refrigerators. Currently, the method used uniformly increases efficiency standards across all product classes. The method should differentiate annual energy use of refrigerators and freezers irrespective of configuration. *Consumer Reports*® measures annual energy use and usable capacity to determine energy efficiency irrespective of refrigerator or freezer configuration.

We also agree that the current method of specifying different energy allowances for specific configurations, i.e., side-by-sides, bottom freezers, top freezers, etc., confuses

[1] Consumers Union of United States, Inc., publisher of *Consumer Reports*®, is a nonprofit membership organization chartered in 1936 to provide consumers with information, education, and counsel about goods, services, health and personal finance. Consumers Union's publications and services have a combined paid circulation of approximately 8.3 million. These publications regularly carry articles on Consumers Union's own product testing; on health, product safety, and marketplace economics; and on legislative, judicial, and regulatory actions that affect consumer welfare. Consumers Union's income is solely derived from the sale of *Consumer Reports*®, its other publications and services, fees, noncommercial contributions and grants. Consumers Union's publications and services carry no outside advertising and receive no commercial support.

consumers. Because of these different allowances, consumers shopping for a refrigerator can and do find Energy Star qualified units that use more energy than non-qualified units. This diminishes the credibility and effectiveness of the Energy Star designation. Using adjusted volume to specify energy allowances will make it easier for consumers to understand which refrigerators and freezers are the most energy efficient, regardless of configuration. This will promote Energy Star's mission to have consumers choose the most energy efficient appliances.

An example of the problem with the current method of configuration-specific energy allowance specifications is with the very popular French door refrigerators. French door refrigerators account for nearly 76% of all bottom freezer-type purchases.[2] These double-door bottom-mount freezers have steadily increased sales in recent years, gaining nearly 20 points in the bottom freezer market share since 2007, according to Synovate market data.[3] However, like side-by-sides refrigerators, French door models and newer 4-door models as a group, especially those with through-the-door ice and water, use more energy than refrigerators with freezers on top. By using the adjusted volume to specify energy allowance instead of the current method, consumers will be able to more easily compare the energy consumption of the French door models with the top-freezer models, which will allow consumers to save more on energy costs in the long run while still having the same volume of usable space for food storage.

III. Energy Star Residential Program Should Cover More Appliances

Consumers Union believes the Energy Star residential program should be extended to cover wine refrigerators and beverage centers. Although wine chillers do not necessarily consume large amounts of electricity, they are not particularly efficient either. When *Consumer Reports*® rates wine chillers and beverage centers, it takes energy efficiency into account. The least efficient model *Consumer Reports*® recently tested used more than twice as much as some other models and almost as much as an 18-cubic-foot refrigerator. Energy Star exists to help consumers choose larger kitchen appliances that are energy efficient and cost-saving, and it makes sense to include wine chillers and beverage centers, which are larger-scale kitchen appliances.

IV. Smart Grid Enabled Appliances

Consumers Union takes issue with the idea that Energy Star should provide a credit for smart grid capabilities, especially a five percent credit. Smart appliances do not necessarily provide any consumer energy savings. Most of the benefits of smart appliances are accrued by the utility, and not all utilities have the ability to utilize smart appliance capabilities, or by ratepayers in general. Energy Star is a label that consumers interpret as an indication that the product uses less energy than non-Energy Star products and will directly benefit their bottom line. Consumers do not view Energy Star products as providing a demand-response benefit.

[2] Synovate Duratrend run, 8/3/11.
[3] *Id*.

In addition, we should add that, at this time, less than one percent of households have access to the technologies, such as smart meters and time-of-use pricing, which would let them take advantage of any monetary savings due to the smart-grid enabled appliance. Consumers should not be forced to subsidize smart-grid enabling technologies through the back door of Energy Star program, especially since smart grid features alone will not lead to direct savings for consumers.

Consumers Union, however, does support highlighting products with smart-grid functionality on the qualified product listing. EPA is having a hard enough time managing the existing Energy Star program and making specification upgrades in an aggressive and expeditious manner, so the advertising and highlighting of smart grid functionality should not be done through the Energy Star label.

V. Conclusion

Consumers Union believes it would be helpful for EPA to set out-year specification revisions, which will give manufacturers increased certainty on future Energy Star requirements. In addition, Energy Star should change its current specification system for energy allowances to be based on the adjusted volume of the refrigerator and freezer, not on its configuration. This will meet consumers' expectations that the Energy Star label will save them money on energy costs. Energy Star should also expand its labeling to include other residential refrigeration and freezing appliance such as wine chillers and beverage centers. Finally, Energy Star should not provide a five percent credit for smart grid enabled appliances, since consumers do not see a direct benefit of smart grid enabled appliances. While smart grid enabled appliances should be advertised as such, it should not take place through the Energy Star label.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Schaefer

Esther Peterson Fellow
Consumers Union
1101 17th Street, NW
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
202.462.6262