



## Shoppers in favour of carbon footprint labels on food

**The majority of respondents** to a UK survey would like to see labels explaining the carbon footprint of the food they buy. 72% of the supermarket shoppers questioned were in favour of carbon labels on food. The survey also found that 42% had changed their shopping habits in the last 10 years in response to environmental concerns.

**Around 19% of the UK's carbon emissions** come from food production<sup>1</sup>. One way of reducing the carbon footprint of food production is by encouraging shoppers to switch to low carbon products by introducing carbon footprint labelling. In 2008, the UK government introduced a voluntary scheme to encourage manufacturers to add carbon footprint information to food labels.

To see whether such labels help consumers choose food with a smaller carbon footprint, researchers examined the shopping habits and preferences of 428 shoppers in the UK. They focused on supermarket customers because food sales at supermarkets account for around 75% of all food sold in the UK.

They found that, when choosing products, the shoppers were most concerned about price, nutrition and quality. Environmental concerns, such as a product's carbon footprint, were much less important. However, many people said their shopping habits had changed in the last 10 years as result of both food education (43%) and concern for the environment (42%). As 72% also said they would like to see carbon footprint labels, the findings suggest that shoppers may be willing to choose what they buy based on environmental information, such as a carbon footprint, in future.

However, the same survey also found that 89% of respondents thought existing carbon footprint information was hard to understand, and that comparing carbon footprints between products was difficult and confusing.

The results suggest that, although consumers are increasingly interested in the environmental impact of their food, the existing voluntary carbon footprint labelling scheme does not provide enough information to choose between different products based on their carbon footprints alone.

To address this, the researchers suggest a mandatory labelling policy combined with an education campaign to give shoppers the information and support they need to make decisions based on carbon labelling. Mandatory labelling would also ensure all products of a certain type were labelled, allowing consumers to choose between them on the basis of the carbon footprint. At the moment, such 'within-category' labelling does not take place, as retailers fear it could reduce the sales of some products.

The analysis also revealed that many consumers would only choose low carbon products if the price was comparable to other products. This presents a further challenge for food producers and retailers, as establishing the carbon footprint of a product can be costly, which the research suggests the companies cannot recoup through higher prices for low-carbon products.

1. [http://www.fcrn.org.uk/sites/default/files/CuaS\\_Summary\\_web.pdf](http://www.fcrn.org.uk/sites/default/files/CuaS_Summary_web.pdf)

**Source:** Gadema, Z., & Oglethorpe, D. (2011). The use and usefulness of carbon labelling food: A policy perspective from a survey of UK supermarket shoppers. *Food Policy*. 36, 815 – 822.

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