Carbon labels on groceries need simplifying for consumers

New research in the UK indicates that the public find carbon labels on grocery products difficult to understand. The study recommends that carbon label authorisation procedures should require producers to commit to continually reduce emissions, as otherwise consumers may wrongly assume that this is signified by the label.

Policies, such as the EU Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan, have highlighted the importance of providing information to consumers on the environmental impact of a product. Increasingly, products are displaying their carbon footprints.

The study recruited 24 people into focus groups. After watching an educational video on carbon labelling they were provided with figures on the footprints of various groceries, such as potatoes, tomatoes and orange juice, and on the carbon savings made by buying lower-carbon groceries.

All focus group participants were aware of the term ‘carbon footprint’, but their understanding varied. To understand footprints better, participants wanted to know what comprised a ‘healthy’ carbon footprint and most supported a traffic light style system, similar to existing guidelines on the recommended daily consumption of food types, i.e. a red label could suggest a large carbon footprint, and a green label a small footprint, as compared to similar products.

The researchers explored ways of communicating to the participants the impact of buying low-carbon goods. To put carbon savings from greener food shopping into context for the focus groups, the purchases were compared with emissions produced by a family flight.

For example, to save the same amount of emissions as produced by a family holiday to Spain, consumers would need to buy the equivalent of 2656 low CO₂ potato purchases, or 1.8 years of daily servings for a four person family (in this study, the low carbon potatoes considered were domestic, new potatoes and had a calculated carbon footprint of 140g of CO₂ per 250g serving, compared to 750g of CO₂ for a serving of ready-made mashed domestic potatoes). This produced quite a strong reaction from the focus group participants, who found the scale of difference daunting and were concerned that changing their grocery purchase behaviour may not be very effective. Ten average lower carbon groceries in a weekly basket would only reduce annual per capita emissions by 3 per cent. Only purchasing a substantial number of lower carbon groceries (40) would reduce the annual per capita emissions by a sizeable amount (10 per cent).

Reducing the carbon intensity of grocery goods could help meet wider emission reduction targets. However, the researchers argue that reduction strategies should not rely purely on consumer choice as a minority of shoppers prioritise environmental concerns over other aspects, such as price, or may find labels difficult to understand. They conclude that if carbon labels are to play a more significant role, they will need to be widely applied and indicate a commitment to ongoing reductions, not simply report current emissions. A carbon reduction label does not require the consumer to understand the significance of a carbon figure, merely that actions are being taken.


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