

PRODUCTS FOR A GREENER PLANET

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Facing up to the sustainable consumption conundrum



The earth is running out of natural resources like land, water and minerals so quickly that if nothing is done, some predictions say that by 2030 humankind will need the equivalent of two planets to sustain our current lifestyle.

Those chilling figures come from a famous World Wildlife Fund 'Living Planet' report in 2008, but what exactly can we do to reduce our environmental impact – which has got worse since then – and how should we go about doing it?

People “desperately” need a means of putting the environmental impact of their products into context, according to Martin Barrow, a senior consultant at the UK’s Carbon Trust, which provides companies with certification for their labelling schemes.

“By giving them more and more information they [can] know what the impact of their decisions are,” he said after a workshop on sustainable consumption organised by

EurActiv on 13 June. “Then we’re into the area of behaviour change,” he added.

Studies undertaken by the Carbon Trust showed that consumers would change their behaviour if they were given simple information about a product’s environmental impact on a packet.

With numbers and colours, the Trust found that people could build a “mental map” in a short period of time and establish rules for their consumption.

Such an increased and improved information flow is “the basic way” of addressing sustainable consumption issues, said Ulrike Sapiro, the environmental sustainability director for Coca-Cola Europe, after the same meeting.

More labels

“The philosophy goes ‘Let’s just have more labels,’” she told EurActiv. “Well do labels actually stick? Does this

help? Do consumers get the information they need to make informed choices.”

“We as a company, Coca-Cola, stand on the position that we doubt [and] are sceptical [that the idea of] ‘labels and more labels’ would work,” she said.

Through its personal carbon allowance project, Coca-Cola had come to a view that consumers trusted institutions, government, and businesses to give them a harmonised message about the environmental impact of the products they consumed, she said.

“The trick that we have to find as society - businesses and stakeholders together - is [to] transpose those messages,” she added. “Quick wins” that gave consumers “the feeling that they have made a difference in their choices,” were the way forward.

Environmentalists and leftists also sometimes feel uneasy that the carbon dioxide labelling debate, but for

different reasons.

Burden shifting

Some see it as a way of shifting the burden of climate mitigation from richer producers in the developed world who profit most from their goods production, to poorer and less powerful consumers, who may have little choice in the products that they buy.

Preventing environmental damage in the first place is seen as a preferable strategy to asking consumers to mitigate it after the fact.

However, Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout (Greens) told EurActiv that addressing sustainable consumption was “as crucial as [addressing] the production side.”

“They need to go hand-in-hand but it’s far more difficult,” he said. “How do you tell people what to consume? You cannot really forbid things.”

He called for better environmental information

to be made available to the public, to encourage a change away from unsustainable consumption patterns such as meat-eating.

For Franz Fiala, a spokesman for the European consumer rights group ANEC, the fundamental problem was the lack of a “roadmap” or “master plan” for addressing the issue.

“We have pieces of that but no overall strategy,” he told EurActiv. “Any overall strategy would have to accomplish fundamental changes to the way we live, how we produce, how we consume. It’s quite clear that we have to consume less.”

But reducing consumption had to be done according to principles of global social equity – and quickly, he said.

“We have learned that we are moving towards [economic] collapse,” he explained. “It will happen in the second half of the 21st century. So we need drastic change and that means that we cannot leave this to the market.”

EU wants carbon labels to do what they say on the tin

A European Commission review of carbon dioxide labelling methodologies for commercial products, due later this year, is likely to propose a grading system similar to the EU energy consumption labels for products, goods and services, EurActiv has learned.

"This approach could simplify the way in which the information is delivered, without requiring a simplistic approach," said Joe Hennon, spokesman for Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik.

"The new Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) standard will only focus on the three most relevant categories and will probably use a grading system," he told EurActiv.

This would be "similar to the one used by the energy label, to which the consumers are familiar and have proven to like, based on agreed benchmarks," Hennon added.

The EU's energy labelling scheme ensures that most major appliances, light bulb packaging and cars have a label attached, grading their efficiency performance on a scale running from A to G.

A recent EU report found that these labels were "quite familiar to consumers" and easy to understand.

However the PEF initiative as a whole aims to find a

methodology to measure environmental impacts across 14 categories, some of which are not climate change-related.

As well as labelling, this methodology could also be communicated via environmental information on shelves, other point-of-sale media, smartphone codes, internet pages and instruction manuals.

The EU has not taken any final decision on how to proceed.

Nonetheless, Darran Messem, managing director of certification at the UK Carbon Trust, which measures and provides carbon footprints for companies, was upbeat about the prospect of an expansion of the scheme's methodology.

"Grading systems, such as those used in the EU energy label and elsewhere are well-established and recognised by consumers," he told EurActiv.

It was important for certification and labelling schemes "to strike the right balance between providing information while ensuring clear and simple messages to consumers," he said.

Life-cycle assessment

Carbon labelling is a means of providing a complete and independent 'life cycle assessment' (LCA) – or carbon

footprint – of all the CO₂ that has been emitted during the manufacture, use and disposal of a product.

Ideally, it should allow consumers to rest assured that the carbon-labelled product they have bought will do what it says on the tin.

But consumer and environmental groups have criticised current carbon labelling practices for being misleading, confusing, and open to manipulation by corporate interests.

"An LCA is like a black box," Jürgen Resch of the German environmental organisation Deutsche Umwelthilfe, said in October 2010. "If you enter false and invalid data and misleading assumptions into the calculations, you end up with the wrong results."

"This is what happened with the LCA's recently published by the plastics and beverage can industry," he added, referring to assessments the industry had carried out into its PET one-way bottles and cans.

"Built-in flexibility"

Hennon accepted that because current carbon labelling was based on standards which had a "built-in flexibility" – in the best case scenario – and that they had consequently "often been used

by practitioners to steer the results of the analysis in the direction desired".

But he said that the EU's review of methodologies was intended to "minimise such flexibility, providing a clearer and more structured framework to carry out the studies, leading to much more comparable results and also reducing uncertainties and imprecisions."

One recent report by one European consumer watchdog found that the level of complexity in carbon labelling methodology would befuddle even the experts tasked with devising it.

That paper, by the group ANEC, called for the EU's more straightforward colour or letter-coded energy labelling system to be developed further.

Hennon said the new methodology would be moving in exactly this direction, despite green criticisms that this as an impossible task.

"There is a balance to be struck," he said, "as too much or too confusing information does not help but may, on the contrary, reduce the willingness of consumers to make better informed choices."

EU study

In hindsight, a recent EU study of its option for

communicating environmental product information in the 2008 review of the Sustainable Consumption and Production Industrial Policy Action may be seen to have foreshadowed many of the EU's proposals.

Among other things, it found that:

- Too many environmental indicators confuse consumers and so no more than three indicators should be communicated.
 - The information should come from a trusted, and ideally third-party source, and not the manufacturer.
 - General terms for indicators and simpler rating systems and units of measurement are better than technical descriptions.
 - Information should be provided at the point of purchase for maximum impact on behaviour.
 - Lettered assessments are easier for consumers to understand, although coloured ones are difficult for manufacturers to integrate into their packaging designs.
- "The Carbon Trust supports the principle of comparability across products because this enables consumers to make informed choices," Messem said.



Finding the right mix to spur greener consumption



World leaders attending the recent Rio+20 conference agreed to promote sustainable consumption and production, but analysts say getting businesses and buyers to do just that will require far more than words on paper.

To the immense disappointment of environmental groups and even some multinational corporations, Rio+20 failed to produce binding commitments or a plan on how to strike a balance between consumer demand and the availability of natural resource.

“The current deal on the Rio table is really scraping

the barrel – with woolly definitions, old ideas and missing deadlines,” said Craig Bennett, Friends of the Earth’s director of policy and campaigns. “It doesn’t come close to solving the planetary emergency we’re facing.”

The stakes are high without some action. Consumers International, a London-based group, says humans are already consuming 50% more than the planet can replenish.

The most sober projections from the United Nations suggest there could be shortages of freshwater, food and essential industrial minerals within two

generations as the world population lurches towards 9 billion or more from 7 billion today, and as people in today’s emerging markets become wealthier and more eager consumers.

Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout (Greens) says firm actions are needed to address the challenges ahead. “We really have to think about pricing, how we deal with our taxation, what kind of products maybe [should not be] allowed anymore,” he told EurActiv.

“We really have to have that discussion, and we need to go further than just labelling.”

At the UN Conference on

Sustainable Development in Rio, there was no commitment to remove fossil fuel subsidies – which environmentalists see as one of the world’s most glaring impediments to sustainable consumption. The Rio concluding documents signed by more than 100 global leaders promoted sustainable use of natural resources without setting any binding commitments.

Talk vs. action

The EU is among the global leaders in pushing sustainable consumption through its policies on waste-reduction and resource management, subsidies for alternative energy and an energy efficiency labelling scheme for appliances. The European delegation at Rio also fought hard – though unsuccessfully – for similar action on a global scale.

Yet the EU has also waffled on energy efficiency, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and has preferred public awareness and market mechanisms – such as the emissions trading system – over taxation to compel businesses and people to become more efficient.

The Commission has also shot down national initiatives aimed at encouraging consumers to buy greener products, as it did recently with Britain, which cut its value-added tax on certain ‘energy-saving materials’. The EU executive determined this violated EU laws, as changes to the VAT regime requires a unanimous decision by the 27-country bloc.

The European Parliament, meanwhile, recently urged the Commission to reconsider plans to erase tax benefits for diesel, saying a period of high fuel costs was not a time to reduce such consumer subsidies.

A phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies and a mix of other policies can be effective in shaping consumer behaviour, says one study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Ysé Serret, of the OECD’s environment directorate in Paris, said what produces the best results is working at both the supply and demand levels – for example, governments that provide recycling services or good public transport will

spur people to use them.

Policies that create awareness about the environmental impact of consumer goods or practices – through labeling – can help influence buying decisions. Product bans or phase-outs – as the EU is doing with energy-hungry incandescent light bulbs – are another way to force market changes.

“Some of the environmentally friendly decisions – like consuming organic food or willingness to pay for green energy – are only weakly driven by household demand, and you cannot only rely on household demand if you want to reach very challenging objectives,” Serret told EurActiv in a telephone interview.

“It’s really by using this combination of economic instruments to provide the right incentives, soft-policy measures – labelling, information, education – together with also providing ... the supply side with related services,” she said, adding that a mix of policy instruction “is really central and really matters when it comes to spurring behavioural change.”

Businesses and sustainability

Businesses also play an evolving role. Despite criticism that government leaders were asleep at Rio, executives of major multinational corporations were busy committing to greener business practices. On the sidelines of Rio meetings, industry bosses were building on the World Economic Forum’s call for corporations to adopt sustainable purchasing and production practices and to be more transparent about their environmental actions to build consumer confidence.

German MEP Jo Leinen (Socialists and Democrats) told EurActiv on 22 June, as Rio+20 was ending, that corporate executives were beginning to recognise the importance of sustainability.

“I never saw so many businesses than at this Rio+20,” he said. “Intelligent business leaders have well understood that sustainability is fundamental for doing business and an unsustainable world will distort and destroy business.”

Tory MP calls for personal carbon-trading scheme

The chair of the British Parliament's energy and climate change committee has called for the launch of a pilot personal carbon allowance (PCA) trading scheme, which could be based in his own constituency, and funded by the private sector and possibly the EU.

Tim Yeo, a former environment minister, told EurActiv that with interest in emissions trading rising abroad, the time was right to try out the idea in practice.

"I want to see personal carbon trading and I'd like Britain to be a pioneer in this," he said.

"We've pioneered a number of solutions to climate change, and we've had an intellectual leadership role, so it would be good to push for a pilot project, here in the UK."

"I have volunteered my own constituency as an area for a pilot scheme of this sort," he added. "I believe it could be funded entirely by the private sector so there would be no taxpayers money involved."

Yeo added that he envisaged funding from big retailers or financial institutions seeking to improve their public image, but that he had "no objection" to EU funding for the pilot scheme.

Earlier this year, Coca-Cola and the Carbon Trust launched their own studies into the feasibility of such a system.

PCAs are an extension of the cap-and-trade principle behind the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS) to consumer and household activities – from heating to holidays abroad.

Citizens whose emissions fell beneath an agreed cap would receive a rebate while those living more carbon-profligate lifestyles would have to pay to offset their emissions.

An idea whose time is yet to come

People would "find it easy to understand and they might even find it fun to operate," Yeo said. But the idea has widely been viewed as ahead of its time.

In 2008, the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) rejected the idea on grounds of public acceptability and cost, despite support for it from the then-environment minister and current Labour Party leader, David Milliband.

But Tina Fawcett, an expert in personal carbon trading at Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute (ECI), believes this may have been a blessing in disguise, as proponents were trying to do too much too soon.

"Personal carbon trading got too much political attention when there was very little in terms of a research or support base, so it was easy to critique," she told EurActiv. "If we'd been five years down the line and a lot more research had been done, there would have been more information to base the debate around."

She welcomed Yeo's call for a pilot scheme, which she said would cost somewhere in the region of €620,000. "I don't see why it shouldn't be an EU-funded project," she said.

Antagonism

But antagonism to the personal carbon allowance, or PCA, idea spans the political spectrum.

Climate sceptics and free market-advocates see it as a needless assault on personal liberty, while environmentalists and leftists argue that it will allow the rich to offset jet-set lifestyles, while doing little to address climate change.

"PCAs are a distraction from where pollution is happening and where the responsibility lies for it," said Tamra Gilbertson, a founder of the Carbon Trade Watch group, which opposes all emissions trading schemes.

"We should be taking action at the source by keeping petroleum, oil, and other fossil fuels in the ground, and holding polluters and governments [that do not] responsible," she said.

Social equity was also a "huge concern," she said "because in theory people who have resources and money will buy more credits and pollute more [than] people who don't."

The social equity debate

Fawcett agreed that the scheme could be construed unfair, but added "that's capitalism really. The rich are richer. It's not a function of the policy."

"The reality is that richer people have choices that are not available to poor people across

the whole spectrum of life," Yeo agreed. "Carbon trading comes into that category like everything else."

But it would still be "progressive for poor people" he argued, as it offered cash benefits to those "who live in below-average homes and perhaps do not have air conditioning or swimming pools, are willing to keep their room temperatures at 19 or 20 rather than 22 or 23 degrees, and who may have one shower a day."

Fawcett described personal carbon trading as a politically neutral attempt to address the climate change problem, even if vulnerable constituencies such as pensioners, the disabled and poor living in energy inefficient homes would need special consideration.

"It is using trading so you could say it's a Market Based Mechanism, but it is also a regulatory mechanism because it imposes an absolute cap and says 'this is how we're going to share it out'. It is not really a policy of the left or right," she said.

'Thousands of alternatives'

For activists like Gilbertson, there are "thousands of alternatives" to PCAs, based on "working towards real and sustainable change with communities in struggle against extractive industry projects".

PCAs anyway present multiple technical and implementation issues she said, and these are formidable.

Proponents of the scheme have yet to decide, for instance, how to tax international travel, whether a scheme can be implemented in one country, what computing and administrative systems to use, and how and whether carbon allowances should be extended to children.

Disinterest among policy-makers is another major obstacle to the idea's development.

But a recent ECI research paper found that although press articles about PCAs had dropped dramatically since a high point in 2007, there had been an explosion in academic research papers, suggesting that the idea was still bubbling away beneath the surface.

Distraction or not, the PCA debate may still have some way to run.

MEP: It's ethically unacceptable that we throw out so much food

Swedish MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt explains why she wants to introduce restaurant "doggy bags" in Europe, and what the EU can do to diminish food waste.



Anna Maria Corazza Bildt is a member of the European Parliament for the European People's Party (EPP). She sits on the Parliament's Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee (IMCO). She was interviewed at a EurActiv workshop on food waste.

Is there a problem in Europe with food waste?

We are throwing away more than 50% of what we produce. One-fourth of the plastic bags that we bring home are thrown away. This is unacceptable economically, ethically and from an environmental point of view. The good thing is that everybody can make an impact, and together we can make a difference.

It's about looking at the temperature in your refrigerator at home, taking small portions instead of a big portion.

In the report from the European Parliament, we asked the Commission to help clarify the date labeling because a lot of people are throwing out food based on the "Best before" label which is a quality indication, but people think that this is about

security. Instead it's important to step away from this "throw away" culture that we have because we live in cities.

I grew up in the countryside and am used to this farmer culture where you for example teach the children in school the value of food, and to use your senses; touch, look, smell, instead of just throwing out.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't respect food safety. It means that a lot of food that we are throwing out is edible.

I have introduced, for instance, in Sweden a lunch campaign on food waste; the doggy bag, just to mark the fact that in the restaurant, it shouldn't be embarrassing to take it home like they do in the United States. Just bread and cake and some of the food that you have paid for, that is edible. Just bring it home. And I think it's important that we teach our children that from an early age.

What should the EU do to encourage the diminishing of food waste?

I see a role mainly as an enabler, as a facilitator, as opinion builders... we should spread the right information and engage the stakeholders. There's a lot they can do. They meet millions of people every day. They have the possibility to do research and innovation when it comes to plastic bags, taking into account that there are people that are just a one-person household.

Why do they have to sell 10 apples in a package when there are households with only one person? To have this "Buy three pay for two" kind of marketing... with fresh food it doesn't help.

Europe has to be brought forward. It's important that stakeholders and the food industry put a focus on food waste.



Food waste, greening diets become EU policy goals

The European Commission wants to help consumers cut food waste by making 'best before' and 'use by' dates clearer on the packaging. But measures to green up our diets will not stop here, with policymakers' attention turning to the entire food chain.

With almost 80 million European citizens living beneath the poverty line and 16 million depending on food aid, the European Parliament has launched a crusade against food waste.

Up to 50% of edible and healthy food is wasted in EU households, supermarkets, restaurants and along the food supply chain each year, the Parliament said, calling for urgent measures to address the issue.

In a resolution adopted in January, legislators called on the European Commission to halve food waste by 2025, by adopting a comprehensive range of measures.

"We expect nothing less than a convincing EU strategy that will steer all 27 member states to systematically tackle the issue," said Salvatore Caronna, a socialist MEP from Italy who drafted the Parliament resolution on food waste.

Consumer education starts at school

In Parliament, Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, a Swedish MEP from the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), is spearheading a grass-roots campaign to educate consumers about food waste, starting with school children.

The wife of Foreign Minister Carl Bildt explained that children can be taught to understand the value of food by using their senses – touch, look and smell – instead of just throwing away.

At home, simple steps can be taken to avoid wasting food, Corazza Bildt told EurActiv in an interview. "It's about looking at your temperature in your refrigerator at home or taking one small portion twice instead of a big portion".

At the restaurant, Corazza Bildt is encouraging clients to take home the food they don't eat and pack them in a "doggy bag". "It shouldn't be embarrassing to take it home like they do in the United States," she told EurActiv. "Just bring it home".

Cutting waste is also about

"shopping smart" at the supermarket, Corazza Bildt continued. "A lot of people are throwing away food based on 'best before' dates" without understanding that the product is still good to eat, she remarked.

'Best before' and 'use by' dates

The Parliament's calls have found a favourable echo in Brussels, with the European Commission looking at clearer labelling rules for consumers.

Chantal Bruetschy, head of unit for innovation and sustainability at the Commission's health and consumer department (DG Sanco), said clearer labels would avoid edible food from being dumped, "without compromising food safety".

Speaking at a EurActiv stakeholder workshop on food waste, she said many consumers can throw away food because they feel it is no longer safe to eat.

"On the consumer side, labelling is often misinterpreted due to the lack of understanding on the distinction between the 'best before' date (quality criteria) and the 'use by' date (safety issue)," Bruetschy told EurActiv in emailed comments sent after the May 30 workshop.

"The Commission will clarify this in close cooperation with member states," she continued, saying this will be done via a "common explanation" distributed to member states, consumer organisations, retailers, food operators and food banks.

Bruetschy cautioned, however, about re-writing EU food labelling laws altogether, saying there is "no need to re-open the legislation on 'food information for consumers'," which was adopted in 2011 after many years of negotiation.

On the retail side, she said tax exemptions might also encourage supermarkets to organise donations to food charities instead of discarding it. A milestone of halving food waste by 2030 will be spelt out in a communication due later in 2013, she added.

Greening the food supply chain

EU action on greening the food sector won't stop at waste and should soon be extended to

address the entire supply chain – from farm to fork.

According to the European Commission, the food and drink sector contributes to some 23% of global resource use, 18% of greenhouse gas emissions and 31% of acidifying emissions.

In September last year, the EU executive presented its roadmap to a resource efficient Europe, setting out a 2050 vision for a leaner economy that consumes fewer natural resources. It identified the food chain as one of the areas where further action is needed to reach the EU's broader sustainability goals.

"By 2020, incentives to healthier and more sustainable food production and consumption will be widespread and will have driven a 20% reduction in the food chain's resource inputs," the vision document stated.

A report by the European Commission's Committee on Agricultural Research, published in February 2011, had already made that point, calling for "a radical change in food consumption and production" to meet the resource scarcity challenge and make the European agro-food system more resilient to potential supply crises.

"The agro-food sector should now consider that there is an opportunity to positively address the challenge and be the first to win the world market for sustainably producing healthy food in a world of scarcities and uncertainty," the report said.

Carbon footprint

These warnings have not gone unnoticed among food and drinks companies.

In recent years, the concept of environmental footprinting has become a selling argument for the industry, with most attention focusing on carbon dioxide emissions and food miles – or the number of kilometers food travels before it lands on consumers' plate.

Environmental activists at WWF, the global conservation organisation, have jumped at the opportunity to campaign for local production and organic food.

"Choosing in-season food grown locally can be a significant step to minimising the environmental impact of our diet," the WWF told EurActiv.

At EU level, the European Commission is even

considering to adopt a carbon dioxide labelling scheme for commercial products that could include a grading system for food and other products similar to the well-known energy consumption labels seen on fridges and washing-machines.

Measuring environmental impact

However, both regulators and environmental activists are keen to note that the environmental impact of the food industry is broader than just how far food travels.

"The majority of GHG from food does not come from food miles, it comes from how food is grown, what is used in the soil and to feed the livestock," the WWF said. "There are also the impacts of how it is stored, used and what happens to the waste."

Agro-food companies have listened to those concerns and have started developing their own initiatives to clean up their environmental act. Recently, they developed a harmonised assessment methodology to measure environmental impacts such as water usage or carbon dioxide emissions.

FoodDrinkEurope, an industry group, put together a sustainability vision for 2030, which lists action in three areas: 1) sustainable sourcing, 2) resource efficiency and 3) sustainable consumption, focusing on the consumer side.

"Now this good work has to be taken to the next step, and implemented in real actions on the ground that ensures consumers are given accurate information about the sustainability of the choices they make," said Janez Potočnik, EU environment commissioner.

"It is in the direct interest of the food sector so that those that really invest resources in improving their impacts are rewarded for their efforts; that they are not dismissed as 'green washing,'" Potočnik added.

The Commission is expected to follow up on the resource-efficiency roadmap later in 2013 with a Communication on Sustainable Food.

Green diets

Environmental activists, however, don't want the EU's efforts to stop there, and have started exploring the link between people's dietary

choices, the environment, and public health.

WWF has compiled information on dietary patterns in Spain, France and Sweden. Unsurprisingly, red meat and highly processed pre-packaged food fared worst on both environmental and health grounds.

"Intake of red meat and high-calorie processed foods has increased. These trends have negative consequences for public health and the climate impact of national diets," the WWF report said.

Diet-related health issues cited in the report include obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes (type II) and cancers.

A win-win solution for government healthcare budgets and the planet, activists argue, would be to adopt a healthier and greener diet based on the following principles:

- eat more plants;
- reduce food waste;
- eat less meat;
- cut down on highly processed food; and
- buy certified sustainable food.

"If adopted, such a diet has not only the potential to improve the health of European citizens but the capacity to provide a 25% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from the pilot countries food supply chains by 2020," the WWF said.

Whether consumers will buy it remains to be seen.

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