

A shopping cart filled with various groceries is the central focus of the image. The cart is made of silver metal wire and has two wooden handles. Inside, there is a loaf of bread in a blue paper bag, a yellow juice carton, a brown paper bag, a red container, and a blue container. The background is plain white.

Making sustainable food choices easier

**A CONSUMER
FOCUSED
APPROACH TO
FOOD
LABELS**

Enabling more sustainable choices

Which? research shows that even people who actively try to seek out more sustainable food struggle and there is little awareness and understanding of most environmental and broader ethical labelling schemes on the market.

But with three in four people believing that protecting the environment is an important issue when choosing what to buy, there is a real opportunity to help people through clearer and more coherent labelling.

It is therefore encouraging that the Government has committed to introduce honesty in food labelling so that consumers can be confident about where their food comes from and its environmental impact.

Which? wants to work with the Government, and food industry to develop a clearer approach to sustainability labelling on foods so that consumers can easily make more informed choices.

This report sets out consumer views that should inform the development of such a scheme, based on the following principles:

simplicity

Ensure labels communicate clear, short messages.

impact

Make sure labels are easily noticeable and understandable, as few people have the motivation to seek them out.

consistency

Avoid too many different schemes or different positioning on the label.

coherence

Explore the extent to which issues can be combined into a composite label.

evidenced

Ensure the criteria that underpin the scheme reflect the available scientific evidence.

independence

Ensure schemes are independent.



About Which?

INDEPENDENT EXPERT ADVICE YOU CAN TRUST

Which? is a non-profit-making organisation that aims to make consumers as powerful as the organisations they deal with in their daily lives.

Which? campaigns to get a fairer deal for all consumers on a wide range of issues, tests more than 2,000 products a year and publishes the results of this rigorous testing and expertise in a wide range of magazines and books, and through an online subscription service and new digital store.

Which? is entirely independent – we take no ads or freebies and pay full price for everything we test. As a result, Which? is the number one independent source of buying advice in the UK, with more than one million customers.

For more information, contact Sue Davies, Chief Policy Adviser, sue.davies@which.co.uk or call 0207 770 7274.

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Complex and confusing

Many issues fall under the broad banner of food sustainability: environmental, health, social and ethical issues. As well as greenhouse gas emissions, food production and consumption impacts on the environment by contributing to water scarcity, food waste and pollution, biodiversity, including declining fish stocks and deforestation as a result of the way that crops such as soya and palm are grown. But more food needs to be produced to feed a rapidly expanding global population and to meet changing food demands in developing economies as diets switch towards meat and dairy. As the impact of climate change starts to be felt, the types of food that can be grown in some parts of the world will also change further. It can be difficult to see how what we buy in the supermarket fits in to this complex set of

issues. Reducing your environmental impact may not always be consistent with ethical issues, such as fair trade or supporting local producers, either. The particular food production or supply chain, as well as how we eventually prepare and cook our food and dispose of it can all add to its environmental impact, making it difficult to establish basic advice for individual foods. Information that is specific to food products can therefore be important in order to help people make the best choices on this basis. Several labelling schemes already exist, but cover certain elements of sustainability. Our research suggests that they are generally not well known, poorly understood and on the whole do not help consumers understand how different aspects of sustainability have been addressed.

'Being labelled clearly certainly guides you to it on the shelves... I am not going to start reading the small print on the back to see if it's carbon friendly.'
(Male, pre-family group)

'I've never seen many of these labels to be honest. I know Fairtrade but not the rest. It's terrible, but you just don't look for them.'
(Male, younger family group, hall test)

Understanding what's needed

- In order to understand people's views on sustainable food labelling, particularly environmental aspects, we conducted consumer research in three stages.
- A qualitative hall test to gauge the level of interest and understanding of a broad spectrum of people from different backgrounds.¹
- A series of focus groups involving people who said they sometimes make more environmentally-friendly or ethical choices.²
- A face-to-face survey to understand how a sample of people, representative of the UK population, recognise and view the importance of environmental and ethical labelling, compared with other factors affecting their food choices.³

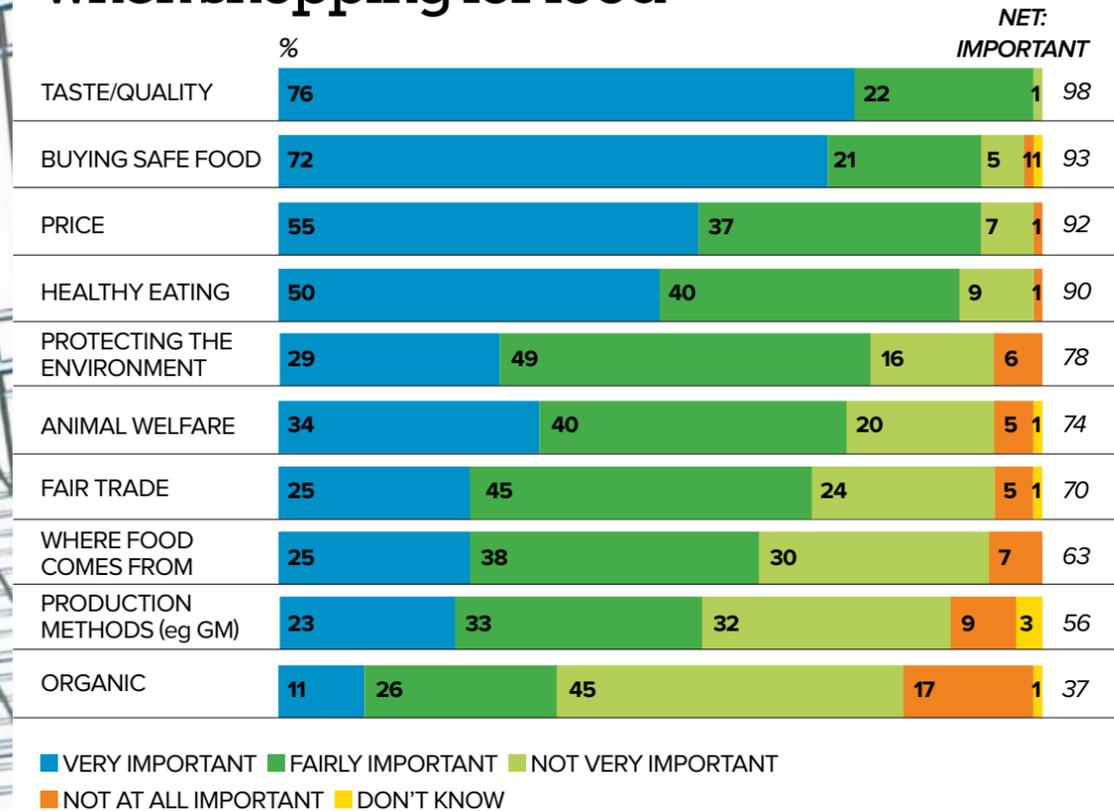
meaningful on labels, there is a willingness to take them into account. Seven in ten people interviewed in our survey said that they would pay more attention to the environmental impact of the foods they buy if labels were clearer. Some people had never noticed the labels that we asked them about, even though they bought the products that they appear on. Some, such as Fairtrade, were much better known than others, but there was also confusion about what they actually mean. *'I'm actually very familiar with all of these labels, but I've never noticed them on a lot of these products, which I do buy. Now that you've asked me to look they're pretty obvious!'* (Female, younger family, hall test)

But with three in four people saying that protecting the environment is an important issue when choosing what to buy and over two in five saying that they took environmental or ethical issues into account at least sometimes when shopping for food, there is a real opportunity to help people put this into practice through more obvious and understandable labelling.



Seven in 10 people would pay more attention to the environmental impact of the foods they buy if labels were clearer

Importance of different factors when shopping for food



When shopping for food, how important would you say the following issues are to you when choosing what to buy (Base all shopping for groceries at least once a month n = 854)

Challenges for informed choice

The focus group research found that even people who said that they are more motivated to think about ethical and environmental issues when choosing food, still put it as a relatively low priority compared to other issues. They found information about what to do inadequate and most labelling schemes unclear, reinforcing the survey results shown on page 5. The main issues raised across our research were that:

•• **Price determines many people's food choices.**

Unsurprisingly in the current economic climate, price has to be a key consideration for a lot of people when deciding what foods to buy. Ninety two per cent of people said that it was important in our survey, though taste or quality and buying safe food were even more important.

'All I look for is the price, fat and calories of food. I never think about any of these things... if it tastes good then that's all I'm interested in. I work full-time and have kids... all I do is go in, buy my food, and go out.'

(Female, pre-family group, hall test)

'I thought about the animals for about two weeks, then I realised that I don't earn enough money to live like this.'

(Male, pre-family group)

•• **Environmental and ethical issues are rarely top of mind when shopping for food.**

Forty seven per cent of people told us that there are too many things to think about already without worrying about the environmental impact of the food they buy. People who are better off are more likely to be interested, and younger rather than older people. There also seems to be a slight north-south divide with shoppers

in the north less likely to attach importance to sustainability issues.

Even the most motivated shoppers we spoke to in our focus groups based their choices on broad rules they had set, such as buying organic or buying British, rather than on a product by product basis. Those who pro-actively looked for organic tended to be motivated more by personal health reasons, rather than environmental concerns.

'If I saw strawberries from somewhere else, I wouldn't buy them... Or asparagus. I just wouldn't bother.'

(Male, older family group)

'I think that if I lived in London or China or America then pollution would be a bigger factor for me but I don't really see the effect so it's not really a concern.'

(Female, younger family group)

•• **People stressed the importance of label design and impact.**

The Fairtrade label was considered to be particularly noticeable and impactful. This also came through in our survey. The highest level of awareness was for the Fairtrade label (82%), followed by organic (54%).

'I tend to do my shopping on the basis of what I can see, rather than having to pick up all the items and search for labels. Fairtrade's easy to see.'

(Female, younger family group)

'I've shopped today for the things that I could see first. If they had been more obvious then I would have been able to buy loads of sustainable foods.'

(Male, younger family group)



92% of people said that price was important



'The highest level of awareness was for the Fairtrade label'

Prompted awareness of different labelling schemes

FAIRTRADE	82
ORGANIC (eg SOIL ASSOCIATION)	54
RAINFOREST ALLIANCE	33
CARBON TRUST FOOTPRINT LABEL	21
FREEDOM FOOD	20
RED TRACTOR FARM ASSURED	20
MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL	6
CONSERVATION GRADE	4
LEAF	3

Before today, which, if any of the following food labelling schemes had you heard of? (Base: all shopping for groceries once a month or more n=854)



While some schemes are recognised and valued, on the whole they do little to help consumers make more informed choices

•• Certain foods were more likely to be linked with making more sustainable choices.

This included eggs and tuna. Issues associated with broader sustainability issues, particularly 'free range' and buying British, were also thought particularly important for meat products, closely linked to health issues.

'I've seen dolphin-friendly labels on fish. I'd always go for dolphin-friendly tuna.'

(Male, older family group)

'I always buy free range eggs.'

(Female, pre-family group)

•• There was a fair amount of support for buying local.

This tended to be more to support local producers, rather than because of environmental concerns and there was a recognition of the trade-offs that have to be made.

'Air freighted? That doesn't really bother me. Locally produced is good though because you always hear about farmers losing loads of money.'

(Female, pre-family, hall test)

'Ethically, you'd rather have the strawberry that's been grown around the corner. But Spanish strawberries

may be cheaper and taste good. That's a really difficult decision.'

(Male, older family group)

•• Sustainable food was associated more with retailers perceived as offering higher quality.

Certain supermarkets were assumed to be taking more action because they were perceived to be higher quality. Asda for example, was thought less likely by some to be doing anything in this area – though it is being proactive. For a small minority, sustainable products were also associated with less taste.

'I'd associate the better stores with sustainability. I wouldn't ever associate the likes of Asda with it.'

(Female, younger family, hall test)

•• People were overwhelmed and confused by the current range of labels in use.

The proliferation of labelling schemes means that they can become confusing – or simply mean that they are just not noticed. In order to be useful and to guide people's choices, labelling needs to stand out.

'You're desensitised from acknowledging them because you're bombarded with these images.'

(Female, pre-family group)

Issues raised by current schemes

We asked people for more specific views on some of the labelling schemes currently available in our focus groups. The findings are shown on pages 11-13 for some of the main schemes on the market: Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Leaf, Carbon Trust Carbon Footprint, Soil Association, Red Tractor, Conservation Grade and Marine Stewardship Council, as well as some emerging restaurant schemes. We also asked about awareness of different schemes in the survey.

While some schemes are recognised and valued, on the whole they do little to help consumers make more informed choices across a broad range of foods. Labels cover different impacts and often appear on a relatively limited range of foods. This is compounded by a number of contradictions and inconsistencies:

•• **Pick n'mix:** Schemes have been developed to deal with specific elements of 'sustainability'.

'Some of these labels are helpful – like Fairtrade – but there's not much information on most of the things you'd buy. It makes you just turn off a bit.'

(Female, pre-family group)



Summary of environment and ethical issues included by some of the main schemes

	MEASURE GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS	RESPONSIBLE USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES	POLLUTING WILDLIFE PROTECTION	MINIMISE USE OF CHEMICALS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES	PROMOTE PRODUCERS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES	PROMOTING UK PRODUCTION	ANIMAL WELFARE
FAIRTRADE			✓	✓	✓	✓	
ORGANIC (eg SOIL ASSOCIATION)			✓	✓	✓		✓
RAINFOREST ALLIANCE			✓	✓	✓	✓	
LEAF	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
CARBON TRUST FOOTPRINT LABEL	✓						
RED TRACTOR FARM ASSURED					✓		✓
CONSERVATION GRADE			✓	✓	✓		✓
MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL			✓	✓			

Some overlap or make similar claims; others are narrowly focused. Consumers have to choose which issues they think are most relevant to particular products if they even spot the schemes. Though some people may want to focus on a single, specific issue, such as Fairtrade for example there is little joined up sign-posting of products to enable sustainable choices based on several issues. There's also a lack of integrated Government advice about what to eat to be healthy and sustainable to underpin labelling, though this is being developed.

•• **Environmental impact:** Many of the schemes take account of environmental issues, but look at it in different ways, and may deal with different parts of the supply chain. Fairtrade standards, for example, cover the use of chemicals, disposal of waste, and protection of natural resources and prohibit the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Where feasible, producer organisations should work towards organic practices. Rainforest Alliance standards cover ecosystem, soil and water conservation as well as wildlife protection. They encourage the elimination of chemical products and a move to integrated pest management, as well as banning GMOs. The Carbon Trust Carbon Footprint Label is specifically about greenhouse gas emissions.

•• **Emerging evidence base:** Schemes include environmental impacts, but the evidence base for how these are to be assessed and what is likely to have most impact is still evolving. A recent report by the European consumer group working on standards (ANEC), for example, has criticised carbon footprinting and life cycle assessment approaches because of concerns about the methods. These include variability and reliability of the data used.

•• **Single ingredients:** Sometimes the certification logo applies to a specific ingredient, rather than the overall product. Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance certification, for example, may just apply to a particular ingredient used in the product. The Rainforest Alliance, for example, explains that 'Some composite products that qualify for using the seal because the core ingredient (such as cocoa in chocolate) is from certified farms may also contain other ingredients from farms (such as palm oil in chocolate) whose production is associated with serious environmental impacts. In such cases, the Rainforest Alliance will require a risk assessment for these ingredients before the use of the Rainforest Alliance Certified seal is granted on these products.'

•• **Different standards:** Fish is one area where there is a lot of different schemes on the market, which cover different steps on the way to sustainable sourcing of fishing. In the absence of Marine Stewardship Council supplies or a lack of standards for farmed fish, retailers and producers are developing their own schemes which may cause some confusion.

•• **Confusion over catering:** Criteria for catering schemes bring together a range of issues, but the evidence base for them is not always clear and schemes that are either in use or under development are in danger of suggesting more significant benefits than may be the reality.



Fairtrade

This certifies that the product or food ingredient has met minimum social, economic and environmental standards, including fairer prices that cover better working conditions, and encourages continuous protection of workers' rights and investment in business and community development. It now appears on a wide range of products such as coffee, chocolate, bananas and other fruits, cakes, biscuits, herbs and spices and wine.

There was widespread awareness in our focus groups, as well as our survey, about the Fairtrade label, mainly associated with chocolate and bananas, and a broad understanding of giving a fair deal to farmers. Products were considered easy to identify due to the clear label.

'It goes back to the farmers in Africa... better wages... subsidies... good environment to work in.'

(Male, older family group)



Rainforest Alliance

This certification indicates that the practices used to produce the food (or a specific ingredient used in the food) take account of the impact on natural resources, the environment and local communities. It appears on products such as coffee, cocoa, chocolate, tea, nuts and fruits.

In our qualitative research, the label was recognised by a small minority who had seen it in adverts for Galaxy chocolate. Our survey found that only a third (33%) of respondents were aware of it.

People assumed that it was related to environmental issues because of reference to the rainforest, but could not be specific and were confused about what it represented overall. There was some confusion as well as cynicism about the motives of companies using such schemes.

'I picked up the Green and Black's chocolate and read about how ethical it was – but put it back because it cost £1.55. I picked up this Galaxy bar instead because it only cost £1.00 and has a different label on it. But I'm not sure what it means.'

(Male, older family group)



Leaf

The Leaf Marque certifies that the whole farm operates according to principles aimed at reducing the environment impact. It appears on a range of fruit, vegetable and some meat products in some supermarkets. No one in the focus groups recognised the Leaf label, but it was thought to be quite self explanatory. It came out as the scheme that the least number of people (just 3%) had heard of in our survey.

'It [just] says it.'

(Female, pre-family group)



Carbon Trust Carbon Footprint Label

This shows the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming, emitted as part of a product's manufacture, distribution, use and disposal. Companies who label their products have measured their product's carbon footprint according to a British Standard and are committed to reducing it within two years. Some products now using this include Tesco orange juice and milk, Kingsmill bread, Tate and Lyle sugar and Walkers crisps.

This was only recognised by a few people and even regular buyers of Kingsmill were surprised when it was pointed out. It was clear that it was about the carbon footprint, but there was confusion over what the figure shown meant, although a fifth of people in our survey said they knew about it.

'1.3kg – but what's good and what's bad?'

(Female, pre-family group)

For the purposes of our research, we included the main labelling schemes that take account of environmental and ethical labelling, but excluded those that were solely related to animal welfare

There's also a lack of integrated Government advice about what to eat to be healthy and sustainable



Soil Association Organic Standard

Organic food has to comply with EU legislation and is certified by different bodies. The Soil Association is the main one in the UK. Its standards emphasise a holistic approach to the protection of wildlife and the environment, for example: the use of pesticides and artificial food additives and chemical fertilisers are limited; animal cruelty is prohibited and a free-range life for animals is specified. The use of GM in animal feed is banned. A broad range of products, from fruit and vegetables to farmed salmon and processed foods carry the logo. An EU-wide logo to indicate organic foods now has to be included as well as that of the certification body.

While people in our focus groups were very aware of 'organic', they generally did not recognise the Soil Association logo specifically. Fifty four per cent of people in the survey said they were aware of organic schemes.

'You would just focus on the word organic. You wouldn't get as far as the label, and even then, I'm not sure that I'd know what it means.'
(Male, older family group)



Red Tractor Farm Assured

The Red Tractor can only be used on food that has been produced, packed, stored and transported to Red Tractor standards. The standards focus on measures to improve food safety and animal welfare. It can be found on fresh meat, produce and cereal and dairy products. The Red Tractor standards also underpin some of the other schemes and retailer standards.

Very few people recognised the label, though the Union Jack had an impact. Apart from this, the label itself was poorly understood. One fifth of people said they knew of it.

'It looks like a British standard. You expect a certain regulation of quality.'
(Female, older family group)



Conservation Grade

Conservation Grade, implemented by farmers in return for a premium price for their crop, is based on enhancing biodiversity. Conservation Grade accredited farmers are required to use 10% of their land for the creation and management of specific nature-friendly habitats. It is mainly used on cereal products.

This scheme was not generally recognised in our research and people struggled to work out what it was about.

'I've never seen it before. It probably means that they don't use pesticides. I'm not sure really though.'
(Male, pre-family group)



Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) provides independent certification of fish from wild capture fisheries, but not farmed fish. The MSC approves fisheries according to its environmental standards, but also requires all companies in the supply chain that want to use the label to be certified as well so that there is effective traceability.

Its fishery standards are based on ensuring that fish stocks are maintained at sustainable levels and that the impact on the marine ecosystem and the long-term sustainability of the fishery are effectively managed.

There was a lot of awareness about fish labelling in our focus groups, reflecting an increasing number of product labels and claims about sustainable sourcing of fish. Fifty one per cent of people interviewed in our survey told us that they try to buy sustainably sourced fish.

Retailers and manufacturers are also developing their own sustainability schemes, and some declare this on the label. This also reflects a lack of MSC certified fish for some species, which may be due to how much it is under threat or because it takes time to respond to the increased demand for certified fisheries, for example, Young's Fish for Life label.

The World Wildlife Fund, which worked to

'They have packaging with calories in McDonalds so yes, I think it [putting sustainable labels on fast food packaging] could work.'
(Female, pre-family group)

set up the MSC, is now working on a similar scheme for farmed fish, focusing on twelve species: salmon, shrimp, tilapia, trout, pangasius, seriola, cobia, abalone, mussels, clams, oysters and scallops.

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council is expected to be up and running by 2011. Organic farmed salmon is available, which means that chemical use is minimised and rather than feeding farmed fish wild fish, fish feed is manufactured from filleting waste from fish for human consumption.

Other relevant labelling schemes found on fish include 'Freedom Food' which is run by the RSPCA and is a farm assurance scheme that takes account of fish welfare (eg standards relating to the water temperature and composition, disease controls, and diet). Many products also highlight if they are 'pole and line caught' so that the risk of catching other fish is minimised and Dolphin Safe, which means that drift nets have not been used when catching tuna.

Dolphin Friendly, 'pole and line' caught and Freedom Food were the most recognised fish-related schemes in our focus groups and were thought to be fairly self-explanatory. There was some suspicion of retailers' fish labelling and support for independent schemes.

'It'd be interesting to hear why, if supermarkets think that their stuff is so good, they don't try to get these (accredited) labels on their packaging.'
(Female, younger family group)

But our survey found that despite its growing reach, few people were aware of Marine Stewardship Council certification (just 6%).

Information when eating out

Schemes claiming that the food on offer is more sustainable are also starting to develop in restaurants and other catering outlets. While some of the same schemes mentioned above may also be used on products sold this way (eg Rainforest Alliance or Fairtrade coffee), specific schemes are also being developed and

rolled out.

The majority of people in our focus groups did not see sustainable choices as a priority when eating out, but on reflection thought that they should be easy to provide.

'This could definitely be done in restaurants. There's the 'V' for vegetarians – why not use sustainable labels too?'
(Male, pre-family group)



Food for Life Catering Mark

The Soil Association's Food for Life Catering Mark awards three tiers of bronze, silver and gold to caterers as they progress towards greater use of fresh, seasonal, local and organic ingredients, high welfare meat and sustainable fish. To achieve gold standard, at least 30% of ingredients have to be organic or Marine Stewardship Council certified; at least 50% of ingredients have to be locally sourced; organic meat, dairy products or eggs have to meet the highest welfare standard and non-meat dishes have to be promoted.



Sustainable Restaurant Association

In March 2010, the Sustainable Restaurant Association was launched, aiming to help restaurants who want to source and produce food more sustainably as well as consumers who want to find more sustainable restaurants to eat at.

Restaurants have to commit to becoming more sustainable and pledge to uphold at least three out of a list of 14 actions. These cover issues such as buying local and in season, environmentally positive farming (eg sourcing at least 20% more fresh produce from a certified producer such as Soil Association, Leaf or Rainforest Alliance), ethical meat and dairy, sustainable fish (only sourcing MSC certified), Fairtrade, energy efficiency, water saving and healthy eating.

Current guidance on green claims

Sourcing of fish is one example of where a wide range of retailer and manufacturer claims are also appearing on packaging as well as independent certification schemes. Tesco, for example, has also launched a 'Nurture' product range which it describes as 'an exclusive and independently accredited scheme to Tesco. It is dedicated to ensuring all our fruit and vegetables are grown to environmental and responsible standards'. As well as specific labelling schemes or marques, people are therefore likely to see more food products making general claims about environmental benefits, as this becomes a greater selling point.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has published a Green Claims Code, including third party labels like those described. This is accompanied by detailed practical guidance, which is currently under review. The Code and the guidance are based on an international standard.⁴ The Code covers all consumer products, including food. The new draft guidance⁵ emphasises aspects such as ensuring a truthful and accurate representation of the scale of the environmental benefit; being clear if it's specific to a particular attribute (or ingredient) rather than the overall product; ensuring the scope and boundaries of the claim are clear; making sure the language used can't be misunderstood; labels, symbols or pictures are relevant and can't be misinterpreted; and ensuring the claim can be substantiated with clear and robust evidence.

Recent research commissioned by Defra found that confusion around green claims, both within the industry and among consumers, remains a barrier, particularly in relation to green terminology.⁶ Other research commissioned by Defra⁷ to feed into the review of the green claims guidance found that claims are widespread, but often relate to the packaging (eg recyclability) rather than the product, although as the schemes set out in this report highlight, there are also several

product-specific claims being made. Claims may also be inferred from the presentation, such as images of nature on the packaging.

Some terms that have long been used on food products, such as 'natural', might also give a false impression of environmental credentials of a food product. The Food Standards Agency has produced guidance⁸ on these types of claims but this is more narrowly focused, stating that 'natural' should mean that the product is comprised of ingredients produced by nature and it is misleading to use the term to describe foods or ingredients that use chemicals to change their composition or are produced using new technologies.

The European Union has also developed an official, voluntary Eco-label (the flower label) which manufacturers can apply for. But this does not currently apply to food products.

Research has found that industry awareness of the Green Claims Code is low, and few have used it. There was broad support for initiatives that lead to greater standardisation and benchmarking, including the possibility of some form of sector-specific labelling scheme, kite mark or stamp of approval.⁹

The European food industry has adopted guiding principles on the voluntary environmental assessment and communication of environmental information along the food chain. These set out 10 guiding principles, in addition to a lead principle that 'environmental information communicated along the food chain,¹⁰ including to consumers, shall be scientifically reliable and consistent, understandable and not misleading, so as to support informed choice.'

European food manufacturers' principles for voluntary environmental assessment and communication along the supply chain:

- 1 Identify and analyse the environmental aspects at all lifecycle stages
- 2 Assess the significant potential environmental impacts along the lifecycle
- 3 Apply recognised scientific methodologies
- 4 Periodically review and update the environmental assessment
- 5 Provide information in an easily understandable and comparable way so as to support informed choice
- 6 Ensure clarity regarding the scope and meaning of environmental information
- 7 Ensure transparency of information and underlying methodologies and assumptions
- 8 Ensure that all food chain actors can apply the assessment methodology and communication tools without disproportionate burden
- 9 Support innovation
- 10 Safeguard the Single Market and international trade.



Which? members' views on fish labelling

In April 2010, we carried out an online survey of 2,324 Which? members about fish sustainability.

Though not representative of the population as a whole, the results also give an indication of some of the issues that need to be addressed.

- **52% of members** who try to buy sustainably sourced fish think supermarkets should stock only this type.
- **52% of members** think it is currently difficult to buy sustainably sourced fish.
- **Only 28%** think that labelling currently gives all of the information that you need.



Learning from nutrition labelling



Providing consumers with facts and figures alone is unlikely to be enough – they need to be interpreted

Parallels can be drawn with the way that healthy eating labelling schemes have evolved over the years, with some schemes focusing on broader claims about environmental benefits (similar to the supermarket healthy eating ranges) and others providing facts for consumers to interpret for themselves (for example the carbon footprint label) as with the nutrition information panel.

Ensuring the responsible use of nutrition and health claims on foods across the board has been challenging. A voluntary approach failed and there is now legislation in place requiring them to be assessed to ensure substantiation before marketing.

After many years of providing nutrition information in a panel on the back of pack, the focus is now on making it more useful by highlighting key nutrients on the front of pack, providing guideline daily amounts (GDAs) and explaining what the levels mean by using traffic light colour coding, for example. Our research showed that people had difficulty making sense of the carbon footprint label when there was no information about whether the amount shown was good or bad.

Lessons that can be learned for environmental and broader sustainability labelling include:

- the importance of using terms and labelling schemes consistently across different products and brands to avoid confusion
- providing consumers with facts and figures alone is unlikely to be helpful enough – they need to be interpreted so that consumers know what is significant and how they relate to broader government advice
- schemes have to be underpinned by scientific evidence and be verifiable
- labelling schemes need to be linked up to broader government messages
- food company buy-in is needed at an early stage, otherwise the competitive nature of food labelling will result in many different schemes, causing confusion and requiring a legislative solution.

Recommendations for future labelling approaches

Our research has raised a number of issues that need to be addressed if labelling schemes are to be helpful for consumers.

•• Schemes need to be streamlined

'We always have a thing for meat and a thing for fish and a thing for veg... why can't it just be one logo that's universal?'

(Female, younger family group)

Our survey (see page 17) found that people were uncertain about how information should be presented, but some thought it would be helpful to try and combine different elements

on the label under a single scheme.

In particular, there is scope for greater consistency of labelling of fish products to MSC or equivalent standards – and for progress to be made on independent, consistent labelling of sustainably farmed fish.

•• Schemes would inform people's choices if they were more user-friendly

'When you go shopping you don't want to spend your lifetime in the supermarket. Most things have that traffic light thing now that makes it much easier to buy healthier food... it's standard and everyone recognises



Preference for how environmental or ethical information should be displayed

Single scheme which shows nutritional value, environmental impact and ethical standards of the product together

40%

No preference

39%

Environmental, ethical and nutrition information presented separately

18%

Don't know

3%

(Base: all shopping for groceries once a month or more n=854)



it. Let's just have a standard thing for sustainability on every package. You could have different sections for soil, fish, pollution... all of them!

(Male, younger family group)

As the concerns about the carbon footprint label also illustrate, schemes also need to have some context in order for people to understand and use them.

•• Schemes need to be more prominent

'They need to be made more distinct and where they appear on the products labelling standardised, like in one corner all the time.'

(Male, empty nester group)

'I just go shopping and I want signs to jump out at me. I don't want to have to pick things up and search all the labels to find a logo that says it adheres to the standards that we want it to. To me it's what I can see – just a general logo for everything that would say someone can do their bit.'

(Female, younger family group)

•• Schemes needed to communicate in a positive way

'I get Fairtrade coffee because it makes me feel like I'm doing something good when I buy it.'

(Female, younger family group)

•• Independence is a key aspect of any scheme

'An independently awarded logo is better than supermarkets, who can create their own standards.'

(Male, pre-family group)

'It's as if they are going around making their own labels up.'

(Male, older family group)

Around three quarters (74%) of people interviewed for our survey said that environmental labelling schemes on foods should be run by bodies that are independent from the food producers and retailers. Half (51%) said they trusted retailers to deal with the environmental impact of the food they sell. Independent schemes also need to emphasise their independence and explain how this is ensured.

•• Schemes need to be used more widely

'The government should say "here's one label" to all the factories and make them use it.'

(Female, younger family group)

'It shouldn't be allowed to be voluntary. The government should enforce it.'

(male, older family group)

•• Schemes need to be effectively promoted

'Everyone knows Fairtrade because it's been advertised. Why can't the government just do that with the rest of them? All we need is education.'

(Male, younger family group)

Principles to underpin clearer labelling

Our research suggests that despite some initial apathy, a significant number of people would be interested in making food choices on environmental as well as broader ethical grounds if it was easy.

Although environmental issues may not be a priority for most people when food shopping, around three in four people believe they matter. If labelling schemes were clearer, 69% say that they would pay more attention to these issues – and this was reinforced by people in our focus groups.

'I'm actually quite open to this. The government just needs to promote it. I've bought that bread millions of times but the Footprint is just lost in a sea of information. I think that once you know about it you'd actually look for it though.'

(Male, younger family group, hall test)

'They should just use pictures and simple words so that we can understand the logo and get it. If you have complicated logos then people will never take any notice of it.'

(Female, younger family group)

'We come from a generation that if it's easy for us to do then we do it.'

(Female, younger family group)

The development of clearer labelling needs to be informed and supported by greater clarity around how consumers can make more sustainable choices. The Government is developing advice, but this is not due until next year. In the meantime, current labelling schemes present a patchy picture which may help guide choices on some specific issues but do little to help make informed choices overall.

A significant number of people would be interested in making food choices on environmental as well as broader ethical grounds if it was easy

Which?

wants to work with the Government and food industry to explore how labels can be made more useful to consumers based on the following key elements that came across strongly in our research:

•• **simplicity**

Ensure labels communicate clear, short messages.

•• **impact**

Make sure labels are easily noticeable and understandable as few people have the motivation to seek them out.

•• **consistency**

Avoid too many different schemes or different positioning on the label.

•• **coherence**

Explore the extent to which issues can be combined into a composite label.

•• **evidenced**

Ensure the criteria that underpin the scheme reflect the available current scientific evidence.

•• **independence**

Ensure schemes are independent.

1 A Hall test involving 30 depth interviews (15-20 minutes duration) was conducted on 12th March 2010 in Watford. 2 Qualitative focus group discussions (4 in total) were carried out for 1.5 hours with 8 respondents in St Albans on 22nd March and Wellingborough on 25th March 2010: Group 1, pre family, 18-25 years old; Group 2, younger family, 26-40 years old, Group 3, older family, 41-60 years old, Group 4, empty nester, 65+ years old. 3 1,043 people representative of the UK population aged 16+ were interviewed face to face between 18th and 22nd June 2010 from which 854 adults who shop for food at least once a month were selected. 4 ISO 14021. 5 How to make a good environmental claim, Draft guidance, Defra, March 2010. 6 Assessment of Green Claims in Marketing: Summary for Policy, Brook Lyndhurst for Defra, January 2010. 7 Assessment of Green Claims on Products, Five Winds International for Defra, June 2010. 8 Criteria for the Use of the Terms Fresh, Pure, Natural etc in Food Labelling, Food Standards Agency, Food Standards Agency, July 2008. 9 Assessment of Green Claims in Marketing: Summary for Policy, Brook Lyndhurst for Defra, January 2010. 10 www.food-scp.eu

