

We need vision – not just sticky labels and a choice
– to meet the challenge of climate change

Low-carb diet



Our food contributes a very significant share of our overall greenhouse gas emissions. The latest conservative estimate from the Food Climate Research Network (FCRN) is that 18 percent (nearly one fifth) of all greenhouse gases associated with UK consumption come from the food system. This includes all stages of the food chain, from farming practices, through processing and distribution, to storage, cooking and waste disposal.

Unpacking this figure, we can say that about eight percent of total UK greenhouse gas emissions are from farming. Looking at it another way, about eight percent of total UK greenhouse gas emissions are from meat and dairy. Other surprises are that greenhouse gas emissions from sectors such as alcohol and sugar-sweetened drinks, and the movement of fresh produce by air-freight, are each big enough to register in percentage points on the UK's overall consumption graph. Yet such important revelations are only beginning to appear on food labels and in the mass media. They often tell only one part of the story and they can be downright misleading.

What tools do we have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the food system? Do we present information to the consumer and hope (or perhaps pray) that they will make carbon-efficient choices? Do we give individuals and companies personal carbon budgets to spend, assuming that they will automatically turn down the volume on demand? Do we rely on individual companies auditing and reducing their carbon footprint, even though they currently lack credible methods for doing so? Do we simply ratchet up the cost of greenhouse-gas intensive fuels and farming inputs, hope to survive the ensuing mess, and then emerge with a magically self-regulating, carbon-efficient food system? And, without knowing which will be most effective, should we encourage these processes to happen more rapidly through legislation, incentives or penalties?

I've deliberately posed these as questions, since the answers are far from clear. What route the food industry will take to help us

towards a less greenhouse gas-intensive food system is itself still very much in question. It seems that food producers and manufacturers are only just beginning to open the Pandora's box marked 'greenhouse gases' and 'oil dependence', and are responding in very different ways to what they find.

Just as in the long-running debate on nutrition – around product formulation, marketing and labelling – the mantra of 'consumer choice' still features strongly. Within the past few weeks, some early Pandoras have announced the first tentative steps into examining and publicising the carbon footprint of their products. Consumers are now told that Walkers Cheese & Onion crisps represent '75g of carbon', according to the Carbon Trust's newly-launched carbon assessment methodology. Do we all suddenly feel empowered to make well-informed snack choices? Of course not, since no-one (presumably not even Walkers) really knows what this means. Is 75g a lot or a little? Who can say? In a vacuum of information, and without a 'guideline daily amount' of greenhouse gases, lonely carbon labels can't help consumers make low-carbon choices. Their main benefit is that carrying the Carbon Trust logo commits a company to identifying the greenhouse gas 'hotspots' in their farming, production and distribution processes, and working to reduce the figure; just as displaying colour-coded nutrition information on the front of packets has given food companies an incentive to reformulate their products to avoid red warnings of 'high fat' or 'high salt'.

But is it enough? When it comes to food, we are all still at the stage of making baby steps into carbon assessment and mitigation, and we seem to be trapped in a pattern of trying to 'tweak' our inherently energy-intensive system by, for example, making long-distance food transport a bit more efficient; fine-tuning our ubiquitous refrigerators; or even (and this is no joke) providing public funding for research into how to make cows fart less.

All of this lacks vision of how a food system

would need to be structured to emit 80 or 90 percent less greenhouse gases than it does now. Reduction on this scale may well involve some uncomfortable trade-offs. The first painful choices are already being faced, with Tesco and M&S launching air-freight labels on fresh produce, for the first time making visible one facet of our oil-dependent food system. Does this mean we will pull the rug out from under food producers in developing countries, and that these supermarkets are putting the onus on customers to do so? How did it come to the point where a rapidly-applied air-freight sticker replaces a long-term strategy to help developing-world farmers reduce their oil dependence gradually, and prepare for the new climate-concerned marketplace?

Climate change challenges some of our most treasured hopes for an ethical food system. We may need to accept this, but we also need to decide where the buck stops. Where do we say that some objectives, such as fair trade or animal welfare, are non-negotiable, even if it means sacrificing some carbon efficiency? And where shall we seek the additional carbon savings to balance and defend these non-negotiable objectives, or to soften the transition to a less carbon-intensive system? As an ethical food movement, we need to get more carbon literate and move swiftly past this phase of crisp-packet labels and air-freight stickers. We need to start setting out a vision for a truly sustainable low-carbon food system, and the steps to achieve it.

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