



FPC PRESS RELEASE

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EAT WITH THE SEASONS – BUT AVOID CONFUSING CLAIMS ABOUT GREEN CREDENTIALS AND CALLS FOR CARBON LABELLING

Encouraging consumers to 'eat with the seasons' and enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables is well-intentioned, but we need to dispel the myth that just by eating locally produced seasonal fresh produce consumers can reduce significantly their carbon footprint, says the Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC).

Consumers are bombarded with a plethora of confusing claims about green credentials. A discussion paper 'What should supermarkets do about seasonal food?' published by the Food Ethics Council explores whether some of the claims made by retailers, campaigners and even government departments about the environmental benefits of seasonal fresh produce stand up to scrutiny.

The Food Ethic Council's report states: 'the total scope for reductions from changing how we eat fruit and vegetables is less than for other parts of our diet. Fresh fruit and vegetables account for 2.5% of the UK's overall emissions compared with 8% for meat and dairy, suggesting that more substantial GHG reductions might be available elsewhere within our diets'.

"We should be encouraging people to enjoy the delights of fresh produce in their prime," said Nigel Jenney, Chief Executive of the Fresh Produce Consortium, "but we should not look to restrict consumers' choice and deprive the nation of some of its favourite fruit and vegetables at certain times of the year by implying that produce grown indoors, imported or stored may not be as enjoyable or as responsible towards the environment."

Fruit and vegetables can be enjoyed in season throughout the year thanks to our global market. Around 60% of fruit and vegetables are imported into the UK, mostly from within the EU, providing us with produce outside the UK season as well as varieties which simply cannot be grown in the UK.

Seasonal marketing is one way in which retailers can help match demand to variability in supply. Limiting production to 'traditional growing seasons' and without the use of technological advances would simply make production unviable from a grower's perspective, irrespective of where they are in the world. It would also undermine consumers' interest in fresh produce, leading them towards greater consumption of highly processed foods.

Without a clear definition of seasonality the Food Ethics Council's report concludes that it is difficult to ensure that retailers are supporting environmental goals, and states that retailers should 'avoid claiming direct environmental benefits from eating in-season produce since these could potentially be misleading'.

Defra recognises the benefits of imported produce in its definition of what is 'locally in season': 'Food that is outdoor grown or produced during the natural growing/production period for the country or region where it is produced. It need not necessarily be consumed locally to where it is grown. This applies to seasonal food produced both in the UK and overseas'.

The notion that carbon labelling is a useful aid for consumers is also ridiculous, says FPC. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU) has attempted to tackle the issue of 'fair and evidence-based carbon labelling' in a recently published 'policy and practice note'. RELU recognises that 'this kind of labelling is extremely complex, and in order to provide useful information it must include an analysis of the entire lifecycle of the product'. However, the paper glosses over the recognition that most emissions occur in the home when cooking produce and in wastage. Instead it focuses on the carbon footprint of foods produced by developing countries, suggesting that they can be reduced by processing food before it is transported by sea instead of by air.

RELU ignores the fact that air-freighted imports of fresh produce accounts for a mere 0.2% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions. There is no evidence that fewer aircraft would fly if

less imported fruit and vegetables were eaten, as at least 60% of air freighted fresh produce is brought to the UK in the bellyhold of passenger aircraft. FPC believes that there is no need to restrict choice by excluding imported produce on the basis of its carbon footprint. Instead the carbon footprint of the whole product supply chain should be taken into account and consumers provided with meaningful advice on which to make informed decisions.

According to Defra's own research some imported fruit and vegetables are grown in less greenhouse gas intensive ways than the same products in the UK, with savings from greater efficiency outweighing the negative impacts of additional transport.

Whilst eating seasonally appears to be popular with consumers Defra has admitted that the direct environmental benefit is comparatively modest and has even considered removing it from its list of 12 changes consumers can make towards a sustainable lifestyle.

There are concerns that well-intentioned moves to encourage people to eat fresh produce in season may even lead to a reduction in consumption as consumers' choice becomes restricted, impacting on economic growth here in the UK as well as in developing countries which are reliant on agriculture.

"We need to encourage the UK consumer to eat 5-day and they need a wide variety of fresh produce regardless of origin to achieve this. With rising levels of obesity and the UK consumer eating on average only 2.5 servings of fruit and vegetables a day we face a difficult challenge in terms of our nation's health. We should not be doing anything that limits choice in the face of this significant issue," added Nigel Jenney.

Ends

Notes for editors:

1. The Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC) is the UK's fresh produce trade association and is based in Peterborough. The FPC has represented the fresh produce sector for many years and is recognised across the UK and EU as the voice of the industry.
2. Extensive membership covers the complete spectrum of industry businesses including growers, importers, wholesalers, retailers, distributors, processors, packers, food service companies and other allied organisations.
3. Eat in Colour campaign www.eatincolour.com
4. 'What should supermarkets do about seasonal food?' a discussion paper for The Co-operative, by Tom MacMillan and Jez Fredenburgh, November 2009 is available from: <http://fec.tomato.netuxo.co.uk/node/321>
5. RELU Policy and Practice Note 11: 'Comparative merits of consuming vegetables produced locally and overseas: Fair and evidence-based carbon labelling' www.relu.ac.uk