



FPC PRESS RELEASE

26 May 2009

FPC takes Health Minister to task for flawed advice on sustainable food

Recent guidance for hospitals is flawed, will have a detrimental impact on the UK food supply chain and the health of the nation, says the Fresh Produce Consortium. The guide 'Sustainable Food – a guide for hospitals' also demonstrates a lack of consistency with overall Government policy, confusingly promoting 'local' and 'seasonal' as better for the environment.

"In the face of rising obesity levels and poor diet it is amazing that the Department of Health is proposing to limit patients' choice and access to a wide variety of produce by its narrow definition of seasonality and what is sustainable," said Nigel Jenney, Chief Executive of the Fresh Produce Consortium.

With 60 per cent of fresh produce being imported to the UK, a key factor in achieving the 5-a-day target is the provision of a wide variety of safe, affordable fresh produce, irrespective of its country of origin.

The report ignores the Government's own definition of 'locally in season', which is: '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'.

Research by Defra has shown that some imported products 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.

The guide claims that it wishes to support local economies and that therefore hospitals should source locally, ignoring the realities and the commercial impacts on the fresh produce industry. Many local companies source nationally and import produce from overseas as necessary, and there appears to be no consideration of the complexities of the food chain. It is nonsensical to suggest that a local supplier should only provide fresh produce grown within the region or neighbouring county to the hospital supplying the food. With the majority of UK apple production in Kent, this would mean that the most UK hospitals would not be able to enjoy this product.

At the same time the guide states that hospitals must ensure that they comply with EU procurement regulations when sourcing food, as specifying local foods is not allowed, making it a difficult task for any NHS Trust to meet these guidelines.

The guide advocates food from farming systems that minimise harm to the environment such as certified organic produce. Yet the Food Standards Agency has stated that there is no additional health benefit to eating organic produce compared to conventionally grown produce. In addition, the UK horticulture industry makes significant use of integrated pest controls to minimise the use of chemicals.

“Considering the value and importance of the NHS procurement we cannot let this guide go unchallenged,” said Nigel Jenney. “With the introduction of the Healthier Food Mark and the proposal in this guide that the standard may be taken up beyond the NHS, we are concerned about the detrimental commercial impact on the UK supply chain and the subsequent impact on the health of the nation. We have asked the Minister for Health to clarify the position before this advice is accepted and disseminated more widely.”

The UK is self-sufficient by over 74 per cent in agricultural produce which we are able to grow in the UK and the majority of imported fruit and vegetables are varieties which cannot be grown in the UK.

The report fails to put into context the impacts of other elements of the food chain, such as meat production. The consumption of fruit and vegetables accounts for just 2.5 per cent of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions in total. Meat and dairy production is responsible for 8 per cent of total UK greenhouse gas emissions, more than three times that of fruit and vegetables. By encouraging less meat procurement by hospitals this report could have achieved far more environmental benefits.

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.

Ends