

Miles better? How 'fair miles' stack up in the sustainable supermarket

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In 2007, 'food miles' shot to the top of consumer concerns in the UK. Buying goods that took the shortest route from farm to table was widely seen as a way of shrinking carbon footprints. This left airfreighted produce singled out as the epitome of unsustainable consumption, and some UK retailers began to label flown items such as green beans from Kenya. Yet looking at the bigger picture, fresh produce airfreighted from Africa accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of UK emissions, and per capita emissions from sub-Saharan Africa are minuscule compared to those in industrialised countries. Against this background are the million-plus African livelihoods supported by growing the produce. Within the grocery supply chain the time is ripe for 'fair miles' — a working idea that puts development in the South on the environmental agenda, and allows UK retailers a more balanced response on behalf of their millions of customers.

As the start of 2007, UK retailers were jostling to establish their green credentials by pledging on eco-initiatives. In part this was a response to a rapid change in consumer polling on environmental issues — especially on climate change and 'food miles'. Both Tesco and Marks & Spencer announced that they would label airfreighted products and stock more locally produced food.

Marks & Spencer launched a £200 million five-year plan in January of that year. Their aim was to become carbon neutral by 2012 and roll out environmental management requirements for suppliers. The company stated that it was looking to minimise the amount of food airfreighted, and began to label such food as 'flown'.

The same month, Tesco's CEO Terry Leahy launched a £500 million eco-plan with a pledge to reduce the company's carbon footprint and encourage consumers to buy more sustainable products. Their target was to measure the

footprints of 70,000 items so that shoppers could 'be empowered to make informed choices' and help in driving the market for low-carbon products. Leahy set a target to airfreight less than 1 per cent of its products (with a bias for sourcing from 'the poor' within this percentage), compared to the 3 per cent currently flown in. Stickers for airfreighted products worded 'by air' were introduced as an interim measure.

In late spring, the Soil Association launched a one-year consultation on ways to reduce or eliminate the environmental impact of organic air freight, with a view to a complete or partial ban. Amid media attention and as part of the huge response to such a ban, IIED submitted its analysis. It shows clearly why a ban on airfreighting will damage lives in Africa, and why the Soil Association should see the consultation as a chance to positively support 'fair miles'.

Food miles in perspective

How do food miles measure up? As IIED has shown, the bigger picture begins to emerge when we compare the realities of airfreighting, along with related socioeconomic and environmental issues, for both the importing and exporting countries.

The view from Africa 'Ecological space' refers to a country's emissions: the bigger they are, the smaller the ecological space. In the UK, the annual carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions rate per person is 9.2 tonnes. In Kenya it is 0.2 tonnes and in Uganda, 0.1 tonnes. Thus, sub-Saharan African countries have considerable reserves of ecological space compared with the countries to which they export.

The Kyoto Protocol recognises the need for equity and economic development for developing countries in the transition to a low-carbon future. Current calculations of a sustainable carbon future estimate equitable ecological space per capita globally as approximately 2 tonnes of CO₂ per year.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Airfreighting flowers and vegetables from developing countries, especially those in Africa, has drawn fire on environmental grounds and highlighted the issue of fairness in the 'food miles' debate.
- Without the right analysis, there is a risk that environmental and food miles arguments will work against development goals such as 'trade not aid'.
- Informed debate in the UK on food miles versus 'fair miles' is now allowing supermarkets to move away from token gestures toward a balanced response.

Meanwhile, the socioeconomic benefits for Africa are substantial. Over 100,000 rural people are employed in the exported fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV) sector in sub-Saharan Africa, roughly split 50/50 between small-scale farmers and employees on larger farms. Those who benefit include both rural and urban groups, and smallholders and employees along the supply chain. The FFV trade also has poverty alleviation benefits and provides seasonal, unskilled employment opportunities.

Indirect employment benefits are also significant. An estimated 100,000 to 120,000 people work in support services for the producers and employees. In total, there are an estimated 1 million to 1.5 million people whose livelihoods depend in part on the supply chain linking production on African soil and consumption in the UK. Every £1 of agricultural income generates another £1.5 for other businesses in Zambia and £1.64 in Kenya.

The view from the UK The UK's carbon footprint is largely domestically generated. Its Kyoto targets demand the reduction of domestic road transport and energy use, then aviation. Estimates that air travel will double in the next 20 years mean that cuts in that sector will be a necessary part of the solution. Yet passenger traffic makes up the lion's share of this rise. In the UK, it accounts for 90 per cent of air transport emissions, while international freight accounts for five per cent. The year 2006 saw air traffic in all sectors expand by 6 per cent.

Agricultural produce makes up only 0.1 per cent by value of all airfreighted goods. For FFV, between 60 and 80 per cent of imports to the UK are carried in the bellyhold of passenger aircraft. In the wider context, air freight is responsible for 8 per cent of the entire FFV sector and 0.2 per cent of total UK greenhouse gas emissions – while FFV from Africa accounts for 0.1 per cent of all UK emissions.

How UK retailers are changing their view

Analysis from IIED and other organisations such as the International Trade Centre has helped the balanced environment/development view to gain traction. The UK government, and some supermarkets and environmental organisations, have shown recognition that the food miles concept has limits as an indicator of environmental impact – and is also blind to the social and economic benefits associated with trade in food, especially from developing countries.

In March 2007, Leahy spoke of the need to balance 'fair miles' against 'air miles', admitting there would be 'hard choices'. On Freshinfo, a UK news site for commercial growers, he said, 'We all know that transporting a product by air creates far higher carbon emissions than any other form of transport. So we could say, "Let's scrap all imports by air." Yet some of the poorest people on earth get their goods to market by aeroplane.'¹ Tesco also said it was determined to boost trade volumes in agricultural produce with Kenya beyond the current US\$400 million mark, and has now dropped the 'by air' labelling scheme.

In June, Marks & Spencer reassured Kenyan agricultural suppliers that it would not cut imports of fresh produce.² Paul Monaghan, head of ethics at Co-operative Retail, meanwhile

described airplane stickers on airfreighted fruit and flowers as 'lazy thinking' and 'dangerous'. In the UK Guardian he said: 'There is a whole series of decisions like this which are being taken which are wrong because people aren't joining the issues up.'³ He committed the Co-op to reducing carbon, 'but never at the expense of the world's poorest'. And in November, Tesco and Marks & Spencer both admitted the stickers had had no impact on sales.⁴

The food miles debate is also being incorporated into a broader agenda on the entire 'carbon lifecycle' of a product, from seed to plate. From this, the Carbon Trust and the British Standards Institute will develop a new standard for measuring the carbon footprint of products. A number of other studies have shown significant carbon 'hotspots' within the food supply chain, in farm production methods, processing techniques, and consumer shopping patterns.

Yet airfreight remains on the radar. In October the Soil Association announced a ban on certification of airfreighted produce that was not additionally certified by it or by the Fairtrade Foundation. On the Department for International Development website, the UK trade and development minister Gareth Thomas responded by expressing concern for 'the livelihoods of the African farmers who don't meet these extra standards', adding that the move 'could also turn consumers away from airfreighted fruit and vegetables in general'.⁵

There is no need for legitimate interest in local food and 'food miles' to work against the interests of developing countries. What is clear is that consumers, policy makers, and food chain businesses should base decisions on good information. If environmental harm is to be weighed against developmental gains, it is essential to consider the full context in more detail, so that:

- The degree of harm is put into the context of Africa's current use of 'ecological space'
- The degree of harm is quantified and compared to that of other food choices
- The degree of development gain is quantified, to demonstrate whether this trade really benefits those living in poverty.

Notes

See www.agrifoodstandards.net/publications for an overview of the issues covered here.

1. Freshinfo (2007, 14 March) Tesco to start carbon-labelling. See www.freshinfo.com/index.php?s=n&ss=nd&sid=40994&s_txt=&s_date=0&ms=&offset=0
2. The Africa Channel. (2007, 19 June) M&S assures fresh produce exporters. http://theafricanchannel.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=235&Itemid=51
3. Finch, J. (2007, 3 September) How green do you want your bananas? Co-op ballots members on ethical issues. The Guardian. See www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/sep/03/food
4. Freshinfo (2007) Tesco and M&S admit airfreight apathy. See www.freshinfo.com/index.php?s=n&ss=nd&sid=44008
5. DFID (2007, 26 October) Gareth Thomas responds to Soil Association decision on air-freighted products. See www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/soil-association.asp

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