

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY

CONSUMER COMMITTEE

FOR DISCUSSION

16 December 2004

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Purpose

1. This paper :

- Outlines the background to the concept of sustainable development.
- Updates the Committee on developments relating to the Agency's policy on sustainable development that have occurred since the last discussion paper on this subject (ConsComm D031/04) was issued in March 2004.
- Raises the question of how to weigh up the sustainability of particular options against other considerations, such as food safety and consumer choice, at the decision making stage.
- Provides background information on five topics (food miles, local food, seasonal food, consumer choice, promoting fish consumption) to be discussed by the Consumer Committee.

Background

2. The concept of sustainable development has emerged to address concern that although the need for development is as great as ever future development cannot simply follow the model of the past. In the past, economic activity tended to mean more pollution and wasteful use of resources. However, a damaged environment impairs quality of life and could even threaten long term economic growth. Furthermore the impacts of development (both good and bad) are not evenly distributed amongst the population, whether at national or global level. Some people have been excluded from the benefits of development whilst often suffering from the adverse side-effects. A quarter of the world's people have to survive on

incomes of less than US\$1 a day. A fifth have no access to health care. The problem is becoming greater with the world's population set to increase by half, another three billion people, by 2050.

3. Meanwhile, in the UK, economic growth remains vital for a better quality of life: for education, healthcare and housing, to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and to improve standards of living through better goods and services. This is the impetus to find a new way forward.
4. Sustainable development is about development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is about achieving economic, social and environmental objectives at the same time, and considering the longer term implications of decisions. These economic, social and environmental objectives are often referred to as the three pillars of sustainable development.

The Agency's Policy

5. The Board of the Food Standards Agency met in Belfast on 14 October 2004 when it agreed the following position statement on sustainable development: "The Food Standards Agency's remit is to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food, both now and in the future. In doing so the Agency will take sustainable development into account in all of its activities and policy decisions."
6. It also considered and approved a mechanism called the Policy Assessment Framework (PAF) for taking sustainable development considerations into account in policy making. The Board further agreed to hold a consultation seeking views on guidance to Agency staff on taking sustainable development into account in policy and decision making. This guidance is being prepared to help staff to better understand the nature of sustainable development and to use the PAF effectively. This document will provide guidance on what policies the PAF should be applied to, advice on how to undertake assessments and on how to incorporate sustainability considerations into decision making.
7. To be "sustainable", the Agency's operational business activities and policies should ideally promote positive benefits in three areas known as the three pillars i.e. environmental, social and economic. However, is this really feasible? Would it be more realistic to ensure that policies promoting benefits in one area do not result in significant detrimental effects in others and, if so, how could this be achieved? The mechanism developed by the Agency, the PAF, works by assessing different activities, policies and policy delivery options for their economic, social and environmental impacts so that the most sustainable option can be identified. The PAF is intended only as a tool to identify impacts, it does not provide a formula for determining the most

sustainable option. This is still very much down to the judgement of policy makers within the Agency.

8. Of course the choices and decisions for the policy maker do not end with ascertaining the sustainability of the various options under consideration. Should the most sustainable option always be chosen? What about the Agency's remit to protect the public's health and consumer interests in relation to food? In reality policy makers are likely to have to weigh up a number of considerations such as food safety and consumer choice as well as sustainability as decision making is often about trade-offs. How should they decide what weight to attach to each consideration? How do you measure current benefits against future benefits? Considering the sustainability of various options entails thinking broadly to see the various interrelationships between issues and options and identify as many impacts as possible, both now and in the future.

Food Miles

9. There is a relationship between short supply chains and transport-related greenhouse gas emissions. This is because all the main forms of transport whether by road, rail, sea and air produce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions. Marine transport produces the least CO₂ with rail transport producing twice the level of emissions. Transport by plane is the worst offender producing between 40 and 200 times the CO₂ emissions of marine transport. Looked at simply, the fewer miles food has to be transported from plough to plate the better for the environment.

Local Food

10. Locally grown food is popularly believed to be more sustainable than food grown outside the local areas and transported in or imported into the UK. This is closely linked to the "food miles" concept explored above. In addition local food is often considered to be fresher, safer and healthier

Seasonal Food

11. Seasonal foods are those foods those that are grown and harvested according to their natural cycle rather than grown in glass houses so that they can be provided pretty much all year round. They are often promoted as being fresher, tastier and of better nutritional value.

Consumer Choice

12. Today's consumers enjoy a wide range of choice in relation to food. Foods are readily available from far flung parts of the world, most products are available all year round and shoppers can even make choices relating to

production systems - organic, GM, fair trade – to an extent. However, as illustrated in the sections on local and seasonal food, sustainability considerations could lead to less choice of foods for consumers.

Promoting Fish consumption

13. The Agency's advice is that people should aim to eat at least two portions of fish a week. Girls and women who might have a child in the future, and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, can have up to two portions of oily fish a week. Other women, men and boys can have up to four. This advice on eating fish is based on scientific evidence of the health benefits of eating fish, the lack of alternative sources of the relevant omega 3 fatty acids and potential risks concerning contaminants.

Sustainable Development Exercise

The Consumer Committee are asked to discuss the various options that they would need to consider if they were determining policy on these key issues:

- Food Miles
- Consumer Choice
- Seasonal Food
- Promoting Fish Consumption

For the purpose of this exercise, the Committee will be divided into 2 groups and will have 45 minutes to discuss two issues.

Each group will need to take into account:

the various policy options that are open to them;

the environmental, economic, social and consumer impacts (either positive or negative) that they will need to consider;

how they have reached their conclusions and explain the factors they have taken into account when making their decisions.

At the end of the discussions, each group will be asked to present their conclusions to the rest of the Committee.

An example of how this exercise should be completed can be seen in the Paper 'Chernobyl and Sheep'.

