

PUBLICATION OF DEFRA RESEARCH REPORT: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF FOOD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

1. Defra have just published (Tuesday 16 January) a research report on “The Environmental Impacts of Food Production and Consumption” (also known as the “Shopping Trolley Survey”). A Defra Minister mentioned this research at a meeting attended by the Chair and seemed to be suggesting that the report might be promoting some sort of traffic light system (“carrots green, meat red”).
2. The report does not in fact promote any sort of labelling. It is simply a detailed review of existing evidence about the environmental impact of various foods. That said, one of the aims of the report was to “provide the basis for development of information on more sustainable food choices”. This might suggest that at some point in the future Defra may be considering some sort of labelling system, but judging from the findings that is likely to be some way off.
3. The key finding was that there is currently very little data on environmental impacts across the entire life-cycle for food, whether primary products or processed foods. However, from the available data the researchers were able to draw a few basic conclusions. Including:
 - Although the report notes that for many foods (but not all) the environmental impacts of organic foods are lower, it goes on to state that, “There is insufficient evidence to state that organic agriculture overall would have less of an environmental impact than conventional agriculture”.
 - Evidence for lower environmental impact from local food is weak. Global sourcing could be a better environmental option for particular foods.
 - Environmental impacts of car based shopping (and then home cooking) are greater than those of transport in the distribution system. Aviation is important, but currently only used for a small amount of food.
4. These conclusions do not pose any difficulty from the perspective of the Agency’s remit, but the publication of the report just prior to the City Food Lecture may have implications for that event and issues that may be raised.
5. The researchers propose that there should be a programme of work to try to fill in the knowledge gaps.

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