

## Carbon Footprints, Food and the Co-op

by Tom Laskaw

The best available science now indicates that the entire planet must be carbon neutral by 2050 to avoid thousands of years of significant warming. That is, every country on the planet must have annual carbon emissions totaling *zero* within 42 years in order to avoid climate catastrophe.

This represents a major acceleration within scientific estimates of the pace of global warming from even a few months ago. And without sizeable cuts within the next decade, significant warming will occur no matter what we do. The window of opportunity will have closed and our best future efforts will only slow global warming's rate of increase, not end or reverse it.

Not surprisingly, there has been increasing attention paid by corporations and individuals towards decreasing their carbon output. This despite the fact that scientific consensus has us years away from a reliable way to measure precisely an individual product's – or even an individual's – true carbon footprint.

Writer Michael Specter detailed the hazards (and what he asserts are false assumptions) of this process in a somewhat controversial *New Yorker* article. He focused on the challenges faced in the food industry as he described the efforts of Tesco, the British supermarket giant, not only to become carbon neutral but also to develop a unified system of "carbon labels" for every product it sells. When finalized, these labels will display a product's carbon footprint so that consumers will have the ability to compare a product's contribution to global

warming as they would its carbohydrate or fat content.

Tesco continues to struggle with implementing its carbon labeling system. They require researchers to pull apart an individual item's entire production process and to decide how far down the supply chain to travel in order to create a meaningful measure. It's a manageable process for produce, but for foods with multiple ingredients – even minimally processed – from different parts of the world, it's staggeringly complex.

Indeed, research detailed by Specter on this subject has led to some unexpected discoveries. It's becoming clear, for example, that a common statistic used by many to estimate a product's carbon footprint – food miles – can sometimes be misleading. Food miles are, of course, a shorthand rather than a true measure: We assume that the fewer miles a product must travel to market the smaller the carbon footprint. But it turns out that transportation costs – even taking into account the outsize contribution to global warming by air travel due to burning fuel at high altitudes – are not always the determining factor in calculating a food product's carbon footprint.

Specter revealed that a product's mode of transport is as important, if not more so, than miles traveled. Shipping by sea, for example, involves one-sixtieth the emissions of airfreight and even has a significant carbon advantage over trucking the equivalent distance. As a result, East Coast wine drinkers concerned about wine's carbon footprint may be better off drinking

French wine delivered to New York by boat than California wine trucked across the country.

But Specter's prime example of this phenomenon is New Zealand apples. According to Specter, apple production in New Zealand is so efficient (due to factors like its exceptionally high crop yield and the ample supply of renewable power) that New Zealand apples transported to a market on the East Coast of the United States have a smaller carbon footprint than apples grown as little as 50 miles away from that same market. That's counter-intuitive to say the least. It should thus come as no surprise that, though Specter does not reveal the study's source, the research was produced – like the apples themselves – in New Zealand.

But other examples seem more compelling, such as beans and cut flowers sent from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. These African products have a much smaller footprint (on the order of six times smaller in the case of beans) than do the same products grown in Europe for European consumption. It turns out that African export-oriented farms still tend to be small, don't

use tractors and fertilize mostly with manure. So it is possible that the right combination of local agricultural practices and land use issues can trump transport costs as a basis for determining carbon "efficiency."

All of which defies the concept that closer is better. Certainly, another past assumption – that the farther a product travels the more expensive it is – has fallen by the wayside. As we all know when shopping by price alone, it seems the reverse is now true. This is thanks in part to a little known international treaty enacted in 1944. Intended to encourage the development of what was then a fledgling airline industry, the treaty stipulates that fuel used for international air freight is untaxed (ocean freight fuel has always been tax-free). This has further hidden the costs, both monetary and carbon, of our food choices.

Given the complexities of estimating carbon footprints, it's not reasonable to suggest that Europeans should prefer all African agricultural products over European ones, or that the Co-op should drop local apples in favor New Zealand apples. Yet these same complexities do raise some

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**Carbon Footprint**

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important issues for us, both as Co-op “owners” and as consumers, regarding the Co-op’s role in making carbon-aware purchases. It is fair to ask how far the Co-op must go to investigate and communicate the carbon footprint – in essence the hidden cost – of the products it sells.

Michael Pollan, author of the *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, suggests that we shouldn’t get too carried away. I emailed him recently to ask him about Specter’s work, which Pollan suggests has “confused the issue for many people, as well as complicating it.” Referring to the case of the New Zealand apples, Pollan strongly believes that “when you compare apples eaten locally in season they win hands down – it’s only when you get to out of season eating that you run into trouble.” He maintains that “if the food is made more from sunlight than fossil fuel, the closer the better.”

That provides some comfort given the Co-op’s involvement with the regional “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” efforts. But despite the Co-op’s commitment to local, seasonal produce, we’re still not entirely off the hook.

It’s true that the Co-op’s own Weavers Way Farm now appears to be far more valuable than anyone could have imagined as it provides significant offsets for other larger carbon-footprint offerings. But just as General Manager Glenn Bergman has recently proposed rethinking the Co-op’s position on meat (meat production being a notorious and massive source of carbon emissions), should the Co-op also rethink its position on out-of-season, non-local produce? Can we now ignore the “minor”

vice of eating berries in mid-winter without examining their carbon footprint more closely?

While there may be “low-hanging fruit” in this regard, it’s hard to imagine the Co-op banning such carbon-intensive mid-winter staples as Chilean grapes (heavy use of pesticides and shipped by air) or California broccoli (transported cross-country in refrigerated trucks). One suspects that taking too rigorous an approach will simply clear the shelves.

Sadly, as Al Gore has observed, this is not a problem that can be solved by individual action alone. “As important as it is to change the light bulbs,” Gore said in a recent speech, “it’s more important to change the laws.” While there are hopeful signs abroad – the EU will begin including air freight carbon emissions in its proposed carbon-trading system and possibly sea freight emissions as well, in essence a backdoor tax – the U.S. remains paralyzed. Whatever domestic solutions may come in the near term must come from the bottom up.

A few possible suggestions for the Co-op do come to mind, however. Though we are still years away from a standardized carbon-labeling system, perhaps the Co-op could add some additional information either to price tags or on posters. Even a set of colored (red/yellow/green?) labels might remind shoppers that the product they’re about to select may have a cost beyond the quoted price that might be worth considering. While sometimes it takes superhuman strength to avoid buying grapes in mid-winter (households with very young children understand this well), an eye-catch-

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PHOTO BY JOANNE MCCOY

**WISSAHICKON CHARTER SCHOOL MARKETPLACE STUDENTS JAZMINE FOBBS (L) AND LINDA CROSKY WORKED HARD SELLING WHOLESOME AND LOCAL SNACKS AT THE MARKETPLACE BOOTH AT THE WCS EARTH DAY EVENT.**

ing sticker might be enough to deflect an “impulse” purchase toward something greener.

Another solution could involve the Co-op adding a “carbon tax” to out-of-season or exotic products with large carbon footprints. Proceeds from this tax could be earmarked for the purchase of carbon offsets. Given the difficulties involved in calculating the true carbon footprint of a product (just ask Tesco), this would likely remain a longer-term solution. Co-op members might also prefer not to be “taxed” in this way. A less coercive alternative might involve flagging large footprint products in the inventory system. Cashiers could then offer shoppers the opportunity to make a

voluntary carbon offset purchase at the register.

These ideas are meant as no more than a jumping-off point for discussion. As individual members and as a body, we of the Co-op need to decide how to reconcile our competing wants and needs – for low-cost, high-quality foods; for sustainable local food alternatives; for organic or fair trade products; for choice; for carbon neutrality. If nothing else, the new wrinkles in the debate on carbon footprints provide a powerful lens through which the Co-op and its members can examine how even small decisions, such as what fruit to eat on a given day, can feed into a much larger crisis.

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