

# Could carbon labelling help cure today's toxic plant-based vs meat debate?

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14-Aug-2019 - Last updated on 14-Aug-2019 at 14:48 GMT

## Could carbon labelling hold the key in helping consumers make the right environmentally-friendly food choices in today's polarising plant-based vs. animal-based climate?

Carbon footprint food labelling could help consumers better understand the environmental impact of the food they are consuming, an expert has suggested.



Carbon footprint labels on food – showing, for example, the greenhouse gas emissions of a certain product per serving -- have failed to find significant take off in the food industry for a host of reasons.

Tesco, the UK's largest supermarket, in 2016 abandoned plans to label all its products with their carbon footprint, blaming the amount of work involved and other supermarkets for failing to follow its lead.

*"We expected that other retailers would move quickly to do it as well, giving it critical mass, but that hasn't happened,"* Tesco's climate change director, Helen Fleming, said at the time.

Tesco said it would take *"a minimum of several months' work"* to calculate the footprint of each product.

The Carbon Trust, a UK-based organisation that helps companies and organisations across the world lower their footprint, supplied the labels to Tesco. A spokesperson told FoodNavigator that footprint calculators are extremely 'complex'.

*"It really relies on strong technical information and every supply chain, product and market is different,"* they said.

But carbon food labelling, however complex, could find traction in a current climate of consumers reducing their meat consumption in order lower their dietary carbon footprint, suggests Amy Jackson, of agricultural communications business Oxtale, and a PhD student studying how consumers perceive the way we look after our dairy cows and why.

## University beef ban illustrates misinformation among consumers

She said that this week's controversial decision from London University Goldsmiths to ban beef from its campus illustrates the need for better information about environmental issues for consumers.

The move, she told FoodNavigator, was *"more about grabbing headlines than about the science behind it and that's disappointing for an educational establishment,"* she said.

*"The science they may be looking at is basically looking at US scenarios where beef production is completely different. There are a range of beef production systems in the US but the scenarios in the UK are completely different and the range of environmental impacts is enormous. On top of that, the UN IPPC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] report which came out last week has been widely misreported as saying people should be giving up meat. It does not say that: it says some diets are more sustainable than others."*

So instead of picking out beef, Goldsmiths *"would be better off looking at sustainably sourced foods and looking at the carbon footprints and the water footprint of those individual products that they're sourcing rather than just taking some headlines from some studies that are done on the other side of the world which look at worse-case scenario."*

*"If you look at methane, it's being produced and it's degrading whereas carbon dioxide just keeps building and building because it doesn't degrade in the same way as methane."*

## Taking a blunt instrument to a very complicated argument

The issue, Jackson added, is *"very complicated and what they've done is taken a very simplistic look at this. I'd like to ask if they've looked at the environmental impact of other foods they are sourcing because I think they would find if they sourced beef from the right place it could be a heck of a lot more beneficial to the environment than some of the other things they might be sourcing. I think they've applied a very blunt instrument to a very complicated argument."*

That's where something like carbon labelling could help educate consumers on what are the most effective ways of reducing their carbon footprint.

*"It's very hard if you're a consumer in a supermarket looking for a product because there isn't the labelling or the information there,"* said Jackson. *"What I suggest they do is ask and challenge. If people say they want to know what the environmental impact is of their food then that we might start to get labelling."*

As it stands, it's hard for people to know the true environmental impact of their food, she argued. *"People say that chicken and pork is better because they are far more efficient converters of feed into meat. That is true but equally they are consuming grain and soy. They are consuming a lot of feeds that are potentially grown on land that could produce human edible foods. So there's a trade off everywhere."*

*"Institutions should be asking for the information about where they are sourcing food from and getting those footprints. But for consumers they need to be requesting that information and if they keep asking for it at some point retailers and supply chains are going to have to do that."*

She said people need more information so they can make their own decisions about what is sustainable.

*"What Goldsmiths quite easily could have done was find a sustainable source of beef and done the investigative work to check what the carbon and environmental footprint of that beef was. But it's just banned it which, is*

*ridiculous."*

## **'The scapegoating of meat is dangerous'**

Others agreed the move by Goldsmiths University to ban beef from its campus food outlets was 'overly simplistic'.

The *National Farmers' Union (NFU)* Vice President Stuart Roberts said it showed a lack of understanding of how British beef is produced, compared to beef production globally.

Roberts said: *"Tackling climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time but singling out one food product is clearly an overly simplistic approach."*

*"The main issue with this is the lack of understanding or recognition between British beef and beef produced elsewhere. Our standards of beef production in the UK are among the most efficient in the world, with British livestock grazing in extensive, grass-based systems - meaning a greenhouse gas footprint 2.5 times smaller than the global average."*

Frédéric Leroy, professor of food science and biotechnology at *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, said: *"Veganism is no silver-bullet, and the scapegoating of meat is dangerous and will see us ignoring things like fossil fuels and ultra processed foods, that are actually hurting our health and the planet."*

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