

### **What are food miles?**

Put simply, food miles are the measure of the distance a food travels from field to plate. Agriculture and food now account for nearly 30 per cent of goods transported on our roads.

This travel adds substantially to the carbon dioxide emissions that are contributing to climate change - which is why food miles matter. A new report by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) says that food miles rose by 15 per cent between 1992 and 2002.

### **Why does our food travel so far?**

Food travels further these days partly because the centralised systems of supermarkets have taken over from local and regional markets. It defies common sense, but a pint of milk or a crop of potatoes can be transported many miles to be packaged at a central depot and then sent many miles back to be sold near where they were produced in the first place.

Also, because of the way the food processing industry works, ingredients travel around the country from factory to factory, before they make their way to the shops.

Then there's imported produce. 95% of the fruit and half of the vegetables in the UK are imported. The amount of food being flown into the UK doubled in the 1990s and is predicted to rise further each year. E.g. strawberries are flown in from warmer climates to satisfy our desire for permanent dietary summertime, and air freight has a far bigger impact on the environment than sea or road travel has.

Another reason for mounting food miles is comparative labour costs. E.g. some British fish is now sent to China (lower labour costs) for processing, then sent back to the UK to be sold.

Consumers are also directly responsible for increased food miles. We now travel further for our shopping and use the car more often to do it. Each year, the average UK adult travels about 135 miles by car to shop for food, more often than not making trips to large, out-of-town supermarkets. This is something the Government hopes the consumer will address.

### **How far has my food travelled?**

It's very difficult to be sure. A food's country of origin may be on the label but, beyond this, it's generally impossible to tell how far the food has travelled and by what means. The means of transport - as well as the distance - is an important consideration. A long journey by boat, for example, has less environmental impact than a shorter one by road. This is part of the reason why good farmers' markets have a policy of selling food from within a defined local area.

### **Why else do food miles matter?**

The transport of live animals is an important animal welfare issue. The numbers of animals being hauled around the country have grown with the trend for large, centralised abattoirs and meat-processing plants. Animals are also exported and imported to and from other countries. For consumers, there is also the question of quality. Freshly picked fruit and vegetables are better nutritionally, as well as having more taste.

### **What is being done?**

There are a number of initiatives aimed at improving local food in the UK, at both a regional and a local level. Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, is piloting projects to get local food into local schools, hospitals and shops.

Sustain is part of Food Links, an alliance of organisations around the UK involved in projects aimed at developing local food economies and decreasing the distance that food travels. Tully Wakeman of East Anglia Food Links believes it is crucial that local food is not a niche product, but that it becomes

a far bigger part of the mainstream. "We need to build the infrastructure to bring together farmers so they can supply a reliable stream of local produce," he says.

Supermarkets are increasingly aware of growing consumer concern about food miles and some are trying to increase locally produced food. How far this extends into their overall supplies remains to be seen.

Lord Bach, the Minister for sustainable farming and food, believes retailers have the right to source food from wherever they want. He adds: "I think supermarkets should think very carefully about local, regional food, but I would not take away their right buy food where they want to because I believe in free trade."

But the Government has decided to take action and is planning to reduce the environmental and social costs of food transport in the UK by 20 per cent by 2012. The recent Defra report estimates costs of food miles at £9billion each year, half of which is down to road congestion. To complicate matters further, the recent Defra report also shows that food miles are not the only way to measure the environmental impact the food we eat can have.

For example, the report shows that it is less environmentally friendly to grow British tomatoes than it is to import tomatoes from Spain. It says the energy needed to heat the glass houses for growing tomatoes in Britain is significantly more than the energy used in transporting tomatoes from Spain, where no heating is used because of the warmer climate. However, British tomato growers have reduced the amount of energy they use in recent years and most now use natural gas for heating.

### What can I do?

The individual consumer can make a difference right away, for example:

- Walk to local shops when possible and buy fresh ingredients to cook at home will have an impact. Lord Bach says: "Consumers can consider ways of making food shopping more sustainable e.g. fewer trips to the supermarkets. In the end it's up to them. We don't want to act as a nanny state, but it's important that consumers recognise the impact they have."
- Food miles also include waste, which must be transported from your home to a landfill site. The average household throws away more than three kilograms of food and 14 kilograms of food packaging per week. Buying food with as little packaging as possible and composting waste can also make a difference.
- Buy British produce in its season. Buying seasonally helps negate the need for artificial heating in glasshouses.
- Buying organic food can also help. Martin Cottingham of the Soil Association points out that organic farming cuts down on the fossil fuels used to manufacture and transport the chemicals used in mainstream agriculture. This is an aspect of the environmental cost of food that he thinks is "too often ignored".

It is important to buy locally grown organic food rather than imported, though. To give an idea of how far food travels, a typical basket of 26 imported organic foods may have travelled the distance of six times around the equator.

Defra's head of the food and drink industry division, Callton Young, argues this isn't a fail-safe option, adding: "A longer distance travelled by ship is not as damaging as lots of shorter trips by HGVs."

### Taken from:

[www.bbc.co.uk/food/food\\_matters/foodmiles.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/food_matters/foodmiles.shtml)

References: [www.sustainweb.org/](http://www.sustainweb.org/)