

'Food mile guy' recalculates carbon cost of food

Distance no longer best measure of ecological impact

Battle Creek Enquirer

February 5, 2008



Rich Pirog, associate director at Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

By the end of the year, consumers might be counting carbons alongside calories on their food labels.

Fresh produce travels an average of 1,500 miles from dirt to doorway in the Upper Midwest, according to studies by Rich Pirog, associate director at the Ames, Iowa-based Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

"There is a growing concern over transportation costs, in dollars and in carbon," Localharvest.org Director Erin Barnett said. "I think people are becoming aware of the impact."

Most scientists say carbon dioxide emissions contribute to global warming.

But Pirog, who media dubbed the "Food Mile Guy," said simply counting miles is not, in fact, the best measure of ecological impact.

Potatoes, for example, that traveled from Idaho to Battle Creek by train will leave less of a carbon footprint than potatoes trucked in from Northern Michigan, he said.

"Even though it's a longer distance, you might be better off traveling by rail," he said. "These are things people are going to be paying more attention to."

Companies might soon respond by creating carbon-footprint labels, like those to be calculated for Tesco, an international grocery store chain, based in the United Kingdom.

Tesco is partnering with Carbon Trust, a private organization created by the UK government, to measure how much carbon dioxide has been released in the production of its tomatoes, potatoes, orange juice, light bulbs and washing detergent, according to an Oct. 11 news release.

People who buy locally produced foods, however, can not only reduce their carbon footprint but influence how growers operate, Barnett said.

"If people are buying food from people that they know, and are starting to have a relationship with them, it's possible they are also able to influence some of the growers practices by asking for organic or low-input foods."

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