Optimising packaging for organic products

The Soil Association has helped organic producers reduce the environmental impact of their packaging by providing them with supporting tools and resources.

Case Study: Soil Association

As well as setting high standards for the organic food industry, the Soil Association wants consumers to know that its symbol on a product also means that the packaging has been specified with sustainability in mind.

The organic retail market in the UK is worth over £1 billion. The sector covers the direct sales market (mail order, box schemes and farmers’ markets) and both multiple and independent retailers. Because the direct sales market involves mainly loose product and short travel distances, packaging is generally minimal. Supermarket packaging tends to be greater due to long distance transport and stacking/display requirements. The range and volume of organic products sold by supermarkets is one of the biggest growth areas. At the same time, organic consumers tend to be more aware of the environmental impact of the products they buy; therefore they will be looking for ways in which they as individuals can reduce their environmental impact. Less packaging could facilitate this.

The Soil Association’s organic standards have always emphasised the importance of keeping packaging to a minimum, consistent with environmental considerations. With support from WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) and other project partners, the Soil Association has now developed revised packaging standards and guidance notes that will:

- address consumer concerns about apparent over-packaging of organic products; and
- minimise the amount of packaging used on organic products.

To date, the Soil Association’s organic standards have only recommended good practice in relation to packaging. The new standards require all licensees who package products to take account of the environmental impact of their packaging in order to qualify for certification.

Key facts

- The Soil Association’s revised organic standards aim to reduce packaging.
- The new standards were developed with the aid of WRAP and an industry steering group of retailers, licensees, processors, packaging manufacturers and packaging specialists.
- Three pilot projects demonstrate the potential savings from making even small changes to packaging.
- Licensees who use packaging must comply with these new standards in order to obtain certification for their products.
- A guidance document on best practice in reducing, reusing and recycling packaging was produced during the project and this has been sent to all licensees.
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**Making it happen**

The project funded by WRAP’s Innovation Fund focused on supermarket sales and independent retailers, including mail order and delivery systems.

A Packaging Working Group (PWG) was set up consisting of licensees, retailers, packaging manufacturers, researchers and packaging technical experts. The group examined all the different packaging processes and materials, together with consumer information on labels and promotion of the proposed new standard. The PWG worked with producers, reprocessors and retailers of organic products to carry out pilot projects with Duchy Originals, Green & Black’s, and Sheepdrove Organic Farm. Supply chain support for the changes was obtained by consulting all key stakeholders.

A 70-page guide, ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: a guide to minimising the environmental impact of packaging’, was written in consultation with the PWG to provide practical advice on how to minimise, reuse and recycle packaging, and to use recycled content. It explains why packaging minimisation is important, why it is good for business and gives guidance on best practice in materials used. All licensees have been sent a copy of this guide, to help them make informed environmental choices about the packaging they use.

The Soil Association’s council approved the new standards in July 2006 and they were published as part of the Standards Update 2007. The Soil Association began to inspect against them in January 2007, adopting a phased approach to allow licensees to incorporate the new standards into their processes with a view to full implementation from January 2008.

Awareness of the new standards is being built through press releases, articles in ‘Living Earth’ and ‘Organic Farming’, the Soil Association website [www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org) and special events.

Sainsbury’s have found the new standards extremely useful. Commenting on them with reference to new standards for the Sainsbury’s So Organic Bread Range, Alison Austin said:

“We are delighted to see a step forward in defining more responsible packaging. We have taken onboard numerous elements of it into our own packaging standards.”

Alison Austin, Sainsbury’s Head of Brand Policy and Sustainability.

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**Benefits for business**

Business benefits from the use of responsible packaging include:

- reduced material, distribution and waste disposal costs;
- improved company image;
- compliance with legal obligations;
- improved efficiency; and
- allaying consumer concerns about the over-packaging of organic products.
As well as aiding production of the guidance WRAP has worked with the Soil Association and its members to help them put it into practice through a series of pilot projects.

**Pilot project at Sheepdrove Organic Farm**
Sheepdrove Farm uses returnable corrugated cardboard boxes for its mail order meat business. Previously all orders were sent out in a standard box. Two new sizes of box (a ‘mini box’ for orders up to 6kg and a ‘chicken box’ for orders up to 10kg) have been introduced and the original box is used only for orders over 10kg. Customers like the smaller sizes and the new flexibility has reduced the farm’s packaging by around 7 tonnes per year, equivalent to a 23% reduction. The farm is now looking at ways to increase the recycled content of its packaging and the number of boxes that are returned for reuse.

**Pilot project at Duchy Biscuits**
Duchy Originals Ltd worked with its biscuit maker, Walker’s Shortbread, to make significant weight savings through relatively small changes to the packaging of the biscuit cartons. To minimise the amount of material used, the size of glue flaps on the cartons was reduced and thinner cartonboard used. Overall the changes saved 9 tonnes per year of cartonboard, equivalent to a 11% reduction, without affecting the strength of the packs. The new packaging has been well received by customers and Duchy Originals is planning to replicate the work across other products in its range.

**Pilot project at Green & Black’s**
Green & Black’s Ltd examined the packaging implications of its hot drinking chocolate and assessed possible lightweighting options including reusing the glass jars and introducing pouch refills. It also carried out a consumer survey to investigate how packaging affects brand perception and purchasing decisions. The target reduction in packaging was 15%, which would save around 34 tonnes annually. Work continues on this project.

**Moving forward**
WRAP, the Soil Association and other project partners will work with licensees and others to help them reduce the environmental impact of packaging from the organic retail sector by implementing best practice in packaging management.

“This is an important new standard that we have wanted to develop for several years. With WRAP’s assistance and the input of our project partners, we were able finally to do it and we are very pleased with the result.”

Francis Blake, Standards Director of the Soil Association.
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