Factsheet 3 - What the supermarkets and grocery product manufacturers are doing to reduce household waste.

Introduction

Each year households in the UK produce almost 30 million tonnes of waste of which about 37% is recycled or composted. Although many people think that packaging is the biggest fraction of household waste recent figures show that households throw much more food and drink away than they do packaging. Each year households produce over 8.3 million tonnes of waste food and drink compared to 4.9 million tonnes of packaging of all types.

About half of this household packaging and food and drink waste originates from the five main supermarket chains. They are working with their suppliers to reduce this and to increase reuse and recycling. As a result of the first Courtauld Agreement total grocery packaging has stabilised despite continuing growth in population and grocery sales.

Quick Facts

- 49 leading major retailers and brand owners have signed up to Courtauld Commitment 2. This extends Courtauld Commitment 1 targets to reduce waste and achieve more sustainable use of resources. New targets include a 4% reduction in household food and drink waste and a 10% reduction in the carbon impact of grocery packaging through improved packaging, increased recycled content and greater recyclability.
- New meat packaging introduced by M&S has reduced packaging by 69% and improved shelf-life by 4 days.
- The number of free single-use plastic carrier bags given out by the seven major supermarkets has been reduced by 48%.
Packaging - Courtauld Commitment

Packaging protects goods from point of manufacture, through the distribution chain until we get them home. In the case of food and drink, packaging continues to protect the items in the home and extends the period when they are safe to consume and at their best.

Getting packaging "right" means getting the right balance between the amount of packaging and the degree of protection for the product. This is not easy. The environmental impact of packaging can be improved by increasing the use of recycled materials or decreasing the amount of packaging and resources used. This in turn is reducing the amount of packaging waste sent to landfill and using the right packaging on food stuff for example can help to reduce food waste by keeping food fresh for longer and reducing the amount spoiled during storage, transport and handling.

In 2005 leading UK retailers and brands signed the Courtauld Commitment under which they agreed to design out packaging growth by 2008 and to make absolute reductions in packaging waste by 2010. The first target has been achieved with zero growth rate in 2010. They also agreed to identify ways of tackling the problem of food waste.

Further targets with a continuing focus on packaging and food waste reductions have now been agreed for the period up to 2012. Reductions in terms of net emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases, as well as weight-based targets for food have been included in Courtauld Commitment 2. Specific targets include:

- to reduce UK household food and drink waste by 4%;
- to reduce the weight, increase recycling rates and increase the recycled content of all grocery packaging, as appropriate. Through these measures the aim is to reduce the carbon impact of this grocery packaging by 10%; and
- in the grocery supply chain reduce grocery product and packaging waste (including both solid and liquid wastes) in the supply chain by 5%.

49 major retailers and brand owners have already signed up to Courtauld Commitment 2 (March 2010) to help WRAP deliver the new targets including all six main supermarkets.
Food waste
Reducing food waste is a key objective of the Courtauld Commitment. In Courtauld Commitment 1 the signatories agreed to help reduce the amount of food wasted in UK homes by 155,000 tonnes by March 2010 and that target has in fact been significantly exceeded. Some of this is being achieved through improved packaging but in addition the supermarkets and food manufacturers, like local authorities, are supporting the “Love Food Hate Waste” campaign. Courtauld Commitment 2 aims to reduce food and drink waste by 4%.

Examples include:

- The Co-op have printed storage guidance on the bags used by consumers in the self-service fresh fruit and vegetables areas so that customers can see at a glance how long they should keep the items for in order that they are at their best. They also ran 46 “Watch your Waste” events where visitors have been given information and advice on how to reduce their waste and they have provided £70,000 advertising for “Love Food Hate Waste” on customer till screen displays and on their in-store radio.

- Morrisons have introduced “Best Kept” stickers on to some lines to remind shoppers where to store such items so that they remain at their best for longer. In fact this best kept logo and guidance is very extensively used and incorporated for example for in-store leaflets and other communication material.

- Marks & Spencer clearly explain the different meanings of the “use by”, “best before” and “display until” dates on their website.

- Other chains have used their in-house and staff magazines to promote good practice to consumers on using leftovers, planning shopping trips and other tips aimed at reducing food waste.

- Plastic wrappers on cucumbers and broccoli are often criticised, but can extend shelf-life as they reduce moisture loss.
Optimising Packaging

Improvements to packaging used by the supermarkets and brands fall into four categories: lightweighting, increased use of recyclable materials and improving recycling, improved design & innovation and refilling. Examples in each of these areas include:

**Lightweighting**

- Asda have reduced the amount of glass needed for its sauces, pickles, spices, coffee and wine bottles by 2871 tonnes without affecting quality or sales.
- Waitrose have reduced the thickness of the plastic bags for their prepared salad and leaf bags and improved the quality of the seals on the bags without lowering quality and maintaining the shelf-life of the product. This reduction has resulted in more than 16 tonnes less plastic being used each year.
- Heinz have reduced the thickness of their easy open can ends and saved 1,400 tonnes of steel as well as reducing CO2 emissions by 585 tonnes.

**Improved design & innovation**

- Marks and Spencer have reduced the packaging associated with its beef joints and steaks by switching from a plastic tray to a “skin pack” tightly wrapped around the product which not only reduces the amount of packaging used by 69% but keeps the meat fresher for up to four extra days.
- Asda have redesigned the packaging for their Café Sandwich range and reduced the weight of packaging by 56%. The redesign has also improved transport efficiencies as more sandwich packs can be loaded on to delivery vehicles.
- Some products are suitable for compaction or concentration. Tesco have introduced concentrated squashes and cordials which saves over 1500 tonnes of plastic a year and compacted washing powders making further savings.

**Increasing the use of recyclable materials and improving recycling**

- Since March 2008 Sainsbury’s Taste the Difference fresh chilled juices have been packed in 100% recycled PET bottles saving 375 tonnes of virgin plastic a year.
- The leading supermarkets and many of their suppliers have signed up to the On-Pack Recycling Label scheme which uses a simple but clear information panel on packaging to show what the different parts of the packaging are made from and which elements can be recycled in most areas, recycled in some areas and which are not generally recyclable.
- All the major supermarkets now have collection facilities for used and unwanted plastic carrier bags so that they can be recycled.
- Tesco have launched a recycle-on-the-go trial at 10 Tesco Metro and Express stores to collect PET drink bottles and aluminium and steel cans and customers are rewarded with Clubcard points.

**Refilling**

- Asda successfully ran a nine-month trial which saw fabric conditioner being sold in reusable pouches from dispensing machines. The conditioner uses special 1.5 litre pouches which can be refilled up to 10 times resulting in a 90% reduction in packaging and saving shoppers up to £3.70.
- Some supermarkets have introduced a refill pack for their own brand handwashes, without the pump dispenser, giving a saving to customers of almost 23%.
Other supermarket waste reduction activities

Carrier Bags
Between 2006 and 2009 the seven major supermarkets reduced the number of free plastic carrier bags given out by 48%. Other actions have included increasing the recycled content of bags (Sainsbury’s), introducing smaller bags for last-minute and top-up shopping (Somerfield) and offering extra loyalty card points for bagless deliveries for on-line shopping (Tesco).

Working with local authorities and other organisations
Supermarkets have taken part in and supported a range of promotional activities aimed at changing customers’ habits and reducing food and drink waste. Marks & Spencer has recently agreed pioneering “closed-loop” partnership trials with local authorities across the UK to secure more food packaging for its own use.

Waitrose have worked with teams from WRAP at various shows around the country, including their own Leckford Spring Food Festival to promote recycling and food waste reduction.

Managing their own waste better
Waitrose, Tesco, and Marks and Spencer have all started trials to compost and anaerobically digest food waste from stores which cannot be sold or given away to other organisations. Waitrose send this material from 50 stores and Marks and Spencer diverted over 1,000 tonnes in 2008/09. Tesco have plans to build a number of plants across the UK as part of their aim to recycle 95% of store waste by the end of 2010. Sainsbury’s rolled out their zero food waste to landfill programme across all of their stores.
What Local Authorities can do

You could use this factsheet to help brief members and other council staff on the work that is being done to optimise packaging. If you would like more information on how to communicate these messages to your residents contact us for more information.

For more information contact lgs@wrap.org.uk