

Try something new today, says Sainsbury's – but not organic carrots

At the Organic research Centre we've been saying it for some time now - you can't mix the centralised and industrialised supermarket food supply chains with any proper notion of organic production and local economies. And now the Soil Association seems to agree, despite only recently professing as an organization to be relaxed about the 80 per cent of the UK's organic retail sales sitting in the hands of the nation's supermarkets.

The emerging change of heart has come as Sainsbury's dropped the Prince of Wales and Soil Association director Patrick Holden as vegetable suppliers because it says their produce did not meet the right standards, reported The Guardian.

Mr Holden told the paper that he believes he and Prince Charles have become victims of the supermarket system's industrial processes and imposed food miles. They were sacked as suppliers of carrots to Sainsbury's at the end of January this year.

He and the Prince had been forced to transport their vegetables hundreds of miles from their farms to a centralised packhouse in East Anglia before they were sent back to be sold in Sainsbury's stores local to their area.

Mr Holden believes his vegetables were of the highest quality when harvested, but the combined effects of long-distance transport, handling to create large enough batches for the machines that wash and polish the vegetables and further storing after processing to create large enough batches for packing left the vegetables damaged and prone to rot.

The system also resulted in a crop that had been grown for low environmental impact acquiring a greater carbon footprint than conventional carrots grown on an industrial scale, according to Mr Holden. Up to half the crop from the two farms was being rejected in the grading for cosmetic appearance and quality.

Mr Holden said he had decided to speak out because his case was typical. "Everyone who has supplied a supermarket own label will have a story similar to mine to tell but most daren't tell it for fear of being de-listed. This is not confined to one supermarket. It is the unintentional consequence of the centralised supermarket distribution system."

Sainsbury's acknowledges that dealing with small suppliers is difficult for big supermarkets, but says it works successfully with others and is willing to try to find a solution to the problems of its highest profile organic farmers. It said its overriding concern had to be the quality of the food it sold.

