

How green are grocers?

A new mantra is sweeping the City of London, says Organic Research Centre director Lawrence Woodward - "Green is the new black". Incredibly, key investors and opinion formers are ready to swallow such ideas that "Tesco is helping to set the pace in the fight against climate change".

This change of attitude seems to be so advanced that Tesco boss Sir Terry Leahy, whilst denying that he is an "eco-warrior", vowed to make the supermarket "a centre of expertise in how to run a green business". Tesco, he claims, is striving "to make green choice more affordable". He has made similar statements before, arguing for "more" realism in organic standards; a view he shares with Sainsbury's chief executive, Justin King, who has said organic standards should not be "too far from daily reality".

All of which seems praiseworthy. But the fact is you cannot create a genuinely "green business" unless you make fundamental changes to how it is structured. No amount of earnest PR or green labels will change that.

The organic food sector is a notable case study. As an organic farming research institution, my organisation has witnessed the undermining of organic standards. The drive is for producers to follow a quasi-industrial path to meet the supermarkets' requirement that their "organic offer" resembles as much as possible their environmentally unsustainable conventional one.

The story of supermarkets and the organic sector is complex. The essential factor is that in three key areas - type and range of product, quality specifications, continuity and availability - organic production is required to meet the same criteria as conventional production systems and in a price range close to the conventional norm.

However, meeting these criteria in living ecological systems, as opposed to an agro-chemically based system, is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do consistently. The supermarkets refuse to recognise this and there has not been a serious attempt to develop an alternative and organically sustainable supply chain and product range. Instead three things have happened.

First, production has been concentrated into fewer and fewer companies who have established relationships with the supermarkets, often supplying both organic and conventional product. This has tended to be to the detriment of dedicated, organic only operations and producer co-operatives.

Second, there has been a misuse of regulatory derogations, exploitation of loopholes and grey areas in standards and lax certification at national and international levels.

Finally, there have been imports from both within and outside Europe produced using methods not compliant with UK standards. This has been possible because of the less than robust regulatory system and a measure of duplicity LEGAL ISSUE? by some certification organisations.

In a recent Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funded study we found clear evidence of food imported into the UK as organic that do not meet UK, and in some cases EU, standards. For example; pork from Holland where sows were confined and outdoor access limited and beef from Argentina where the large and routine use of vaccines/wormers was not compliant with UK standards.

All of these products have been imported carrying the logo of a UK certification body and sold by supermarkets. None are produced in a way that consumers would expect from an organic system. Unfortunately, this is also the case with some UK sourced products. With a few exceptions the poultry products sold in most supermarkets are produced in ways that fall short of consumer expectations.

So, are the supermarkets deliberately misleading their customers, or do they not know what is going on? They have been told repeatedly, by me and by others. The examples given above were presented at a stakeholder meeting nearly a year ago where supermarket representatives were present. There has been no response. Several years ago we conducted a study for a leading supermarket of its organic vegetable imports, where we found similar examples to those above but as far as we can tell no action has been taken.

The shortcomings of the "organic" poultry sector have received media attention, but to no avail. Mr Leahy, Mr King et al have not yet grasped that genuine sustainability requires fundamental changes to the way we produce, process, distribute, sell and consume. The key task is not simply to make "green choice more affordable"; it is to make it genuine.

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