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Most EU consumers open to eat more sustainably but face hurdles, new survey shows

How much attention do you pay to the impact of your food choices on the environment? Are you willing to cut down on red meat? Is the government doing enough to promote sustainable food? Those are some of the questions several national consumer groups asked to Europeans in a survey spanning 11 countries, coordinated by BEUC.¹ Today, BEUC unveils the results in a [new report](#), just two weeks after the European Commission presented its [blueprint](#) for sustainable food and farming.

The main outcome is that **most consumers across Europe are willing to change their eating habits**. However, to get there they need the sustainable food choice to become easier (including the right price signals, improved information, and more sustainable options).

As the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly transforming how we relate to food,² our survey – run a couple of months before the outbreak – shows consumers were already leaning towards opting for more sustainable choices. It surely is difficult to predict whether trends like home cooking or increased demand for local food will last, but policymakers should capitalise on them where they can contribute to a more resilient and sustainable food system.

Food is the main driver of environmental impacts generated by household consumption in the EU, followed by housing (especially space heating) and mobility (particularly the use of private cars).³

[Main takeaways](#) from the survey include:

- **Perception:** Consumers tend to underestimate the impact of their *own* food habits on the environment, but most are aware of the environmental impact of food habits in general.
- **Willingness to change:** Two thirds of consumers are open to changing their eating habits for the environment.
- **Barriers:** Price, lack of knowledge, unclear information, and limited choice of sustainable options are what most consumers say prevent them from eating more sustainably.
- **Meat:** Just over 40% of consumers say they have either stopped eating red meat or have cut down due to environmental concerns. While consumers have little appetite for insects and lab-grown meat, they better accept plant-based ‘burgers’ and traditional vegetarian food (e.g. pulses) as alternative protein sources.
- **Government role:** Only 16% of consumers feel that their government is doing enough to encourage food sustainability at production and consumption levels.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, commented:

“Our survey shows that most consumers are willing to change their eating habits, but that it is no easy task. Change must be rolled out at several levels to make the sustainable choice the obvious choice.

“Consumers are hungry for improved information on food labels and a wider range of sustainable options. But our individual choices as consumers can only do so much to transform food habits in the way experts urge us to. Regulators, food producers, and retailers have a crucial role to play to adjust pricing, marketing, and every other factor that push us to buy one food product over another.”

On price

“Price ranks first among the barriers to eating more sustainably, in nearly all countries. Governments and consumer groups have a key role to play in making consumers realise that eating sustainably does not necessarily have to cost more. But it must go hand in hand with changes in food habits, such as reducing meat consumption, wasting less, and swapping water bottles for tap for instance.”

On meat

“It comes across as difficult for many consumers to cut down on red meat, though our consumption in Europe is well above what is recommended for human and planetary health. At the same time, most people have nothing against eating more lentils, beans, and other pulses as an alternative to animal proteins. Sadly, the Commission missed a chance to stop funding campaigns stimulating meat consumption when it recently published its ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy for sustainable food.⁴ EU money would be better spent promoting food that we should eat more of to benefit our health and the planet.”

More:

- [Executive summary and main recommendations](#), June 2020 (2 pages).
- Full report, [One bite at a time – Consumers and the transition to sustainable food](#), June 2020, (40 pages).
- Infographic, [Consumers and the transition to sustainable food - 10 takeaways](#), June 2020.

¹ **Austria** (Arbeiterkammer), **Belgium** (Test Achats/Test Aankoop), **Germany** (vzbv), **Greece** (Ekpizo, KEPKA), **Italy** (Altroconsumo), **Lithuania** (Lietuvos vartotojų organizacijų aljansas), **Netherlands** (Consumentenbond), **Portugal** (DECO), **Slovakia** (Spoločnosti ochrany spotrebiteľov), **Slovenia** (Zveza Potrošnikov Slovenije), **Spain** (OCU). Field work took place in October-November 2019, involving a representative sample of over 11,000 consumers.

² [Results of a survey](#) conducted in 11 countries across the globe including Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands found that consumers bought more fruit and vegetables and turned to healthier eating during coronavirus lockdowns.

³ European Commission Joint Research Centre, [Indicators and assessment of the environmental impact of EU consumption](#), 2019.

⁴ Between 2016 and 2019, [24% of the EU agricultural promotion policy](#) budget were allocated to campaigns promoting meat and meat products. Plans to stop stimulating meat production or consumption, which were part of [some early May drafts](#) of the [EU Farm to Fork Strategy](#) for a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system, were dropped from the final version. The EU’s agricultural promotion policy is [currently being evaluated](#).

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