

FACTSHEET

Food Sustainability

How sustainable are our food systems?

Our global food systems are unsustainable. Worldwide, 2.8 million people die each year from being overweight or obese¹ while about 793 million people are undernourished². Extreme weather conditions due to climate change are seriously affecting food production³. While our planet's resources are dwindling, about 30% of global food supply is lost or wasted every year⁴.

The global population is expected to reach over 9 billion by 2050, increasing demand for food. If no action is taken, the availability, price and quality of food could suffer.

Moving towards more sustainable and healthier diets can save money, while unsustainable diets contribute to biodiversity loss, climate change and nitrogen pollution, which in turn affect consumer well-being.

Why it matters to consumers?

A sustainable food system guarantees **safe, affordable and healthy food for all consumers** while using natural resources at a pace that observes the capacity of the earth to replenish them⁵.

What do consumers think?

Consumers are generally unaware of the many challenges facing our food system. But if they are told about the problems, they are concerned and want more information about how their food is produced and how they can access sustainable and healthier choices⁶. Consumers polled in the UK clearly favoured **naturally produced foods⁷ over intensive-farming products**.

However consumers struggle to change their diets because of the **limited availability, high prices and unclear labelling of sustainable foods**.

Barriers faced by consumers

- **Confusing eco-friendly food labels.** The number of sustainable food labels has risen sharply and can make shopping confusing. Some labels are not well known, many are poorly understood and most do not help consumers understand why their food is sustainable. Some green claims – such as “natural” – can mislead by falsely suggesting environmental credentials. This also fuels confusion.

¹ WHO, [Global Health Observatory data on obesity](#)

² [FAO's State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015](#)

³ [BEUC position on climate change](#), 2015.

⁴ FAO, ['Key facts on food loss and waste you should know!'](#)

⁵ See [Which?](#) and the Government Office for Science, “Public Dialogue on food system challenges and possible solutions”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



- **Consumers think sustainable food is more expensive.** This belief deters consumers from looking for alternative products as price remains a key factor when buying food. ‘Sustainable’ must rhyme with ‘affordable’.
- **Confusion over expiry dates.** 58% of European consumers always check the expiry dates when shopping or cooking⁷. Better explanations of the ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates in all EU languages would make them less likely to throw food away. Only those foods that become unsafe to eat should have a ‘use by’ date.
- **The bigger the plate, the more we eat.** Consumers tend to serve themselves more when using large plates or bowls. This biased perception fuels higher calorie intake and food waste. The catering sector could help cut food waste by a fifth if they reduced portion sizes⁸.
- **Doggy-bag shame.** Who has never felt embarrassed asking a waiter to put the leftovers from a delicious restaurant meal in a doggy bag? Restaurants can help to address this cultural barrier, alongside awareness-raising/education campaigns encouraging consumers to take their leftovers home.



What does BEUC recommend?

- **Raise consumer awareness about how food is produced.** The more aware consumers are, the more they want to eat sustainable food.
- **Make food production more sustainable** so the burden is not on consumers to choose the greenest products. All producers should have to comply with minimum legal requirements on sustainability.
- **Food companies should make the sustainable option more available** by expanding the range of sustainable food products on offer at an affordable price.
- **Improve consumer information** by reducing the plethora of eco-friendly food labels. Ensure labels are understandable, comparable and reliable.
- **Cut food waste.** It is a shared responsibility across the food chain which includes tackling overproduction at farm level, preventing breaks in the cold chain during transport, and downsizing portions. A lot can be done too to improve food packaging, date labelling and consumer information about how to correctly store food and manage leftovers.

More in our position paper [‘Food sustainability – The consumer perspective’](#).

⁷ Eurobarometer, [‘Food waste and date marking’](#), 2015.

⁸ Kallbekken, [‘Nudging’ hotel guests to reduce food waste as a win-win environmental measure](#), 2013.