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Sectorial sessions: Collaboration along the value chain in retail through LCM

Key elements to harmonized environmental footprinting and ecolabeling of food products

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Harmonized environmental footprinting (EF) of food products leading to comparable outcomes is a challenge. The European Commission is trying to address this via the Green Claims initiative, the Food Labeling framework and the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) guide. In recent years several initiatives (either governmental or private) have been started to gain insight into the environmental impact of all food products, help companies set and achieve reduction targets and communicate the results transparently, to businesses and consumers, using an ecolabel. Both in France and the Netherlands the government supports the initiative. Private ecolabeling initiatives, like Ecoscore, Planet score, Eco impact and EnviroScore support retailers in their communication and tend to call on scientific committees and task forces. In many European countries governments are looking to developing similar initiatives to stimulate businesses to produce food with a lower environmental impact and to stimulate consumers to make more sustainable purchasing decisions. This abstract outlines the key elements of seemingly successful initiatives.

One of the key elements for a harmonized approach to EF is using a method that leads to comparable outcomes. EF is complex and although product category specific rules are being developed within the PEF framework, these are not harmonized between product categories. This means it is likely that alternative harmonized methods need to be developed, like is done in France and the Netherlands. The international harmonization is becoming more important, not in the least for internationally operating companies.

It is a challenge to have information on environmental impact available for all food products. Some initiatives use a generic database (of +/- 3000 products) to have such information available for all food products in retail. However, generic data do not allow for comparison between food products of different producers. Therefore another key element is the incorporation of company specific data and information, to specify the environmental impact of a food product further. There are challenges in terms of availability of key data points and verification.

Once the life cycle inventory data for food products have been established and the impact on a set of indicators can be calculated, other challenges must be overcome: 1) creating business models as an incentive for food producers to reduce impact and 2) transparent and attractive communication to help consumers in decision making. Ecolabeling can aid both, and a key element is a harmonized method to translate life cycle assessment results into an ecolabel (e.g. A-E or A-H).

The presentation will explain more about the initiatives and networks that are being established, including each key element and how they can be linked together in an initiative driving production and consumption in a more sustainable direction, as is being proposed in the Netherlands.

Key words:

environmental footprinting, ecolabeling, life cycle assessment, food products, life cycle inventory data