

Submission from WyeCycle

Market Share is the root of all evil

The case for legislation stating that no individual business may be responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing.

Every politician would claim to be at least slightly concerned about the following issues:

- Global warming
- Traffic congestion
- Illness and injury caused by road traffic
- The balance of payments deficit
- Loss of biodiversity in the countryside
- Britains 'waste crisis'
- Poor diet and its effects
- Pollution and ill health caused by chemical dependant agriculture
- The well being of developing countries
- Our absolute dependence on oil
- Falling employment in agriculture and allied industries
- Animal welfare
- Loss of community; 'clone town Britain'
- The cost to the taxpayer of propping up agriculture and the rural economy

Time for a definition:

When people -farmers, small businesses, politicians- moan about 'the supermarkets', the fundamental concern is about market share and the power it brings. What is and what isn't a 'supermarket' must therefore be defined according to how much market share a business has. WyeCycle would define a supermarket as being any business responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing.

It is possible, using this definition, to debunk the myth that 'The public like shopping at supermarkets'. The public **do** like to do all of their weekly shopping under one roof, with a wide range of produce, ideally with an adjacent car park. They **do not** demand that such a place is owned by a company responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing.

Once this difference is understood between what the public considers to be a supermarket and what a supermarket actually is, it becomes possible to see the solution to the issues outlined above. By introducing legislation stating that no one company may be responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing, all of these issues would be simultaneously addressed. Such legislation would not require the public to change their habits in any way, making it a vote winner for all the benefits it would bring rather than a vote loser.

All that is required is the political will to show that it is our elected representatives, rather than big business, who run the country.

Today is National 'Don't Shop at Supermarkets' Day

Why?

Here's a few good reasons...

- ∞ **Shopping at supermarkets pollutes the environment and damages human health.**
The biggest single threat to life on earth is global warming, and the biggest single cause of global warming is vehicle pollution. The average item of food purchased from a supermarket travels over 1000 miles; by lorry/plane from the producer to the store and then by car from the store to the consumer. As well as causing severe environmental damage, the pollution caused by supermarket-generated traffic is a major contributor to rising levels of asthma and other respiratory diseases.
- ∞ **Shopping at supermarkets is destroying British agriculture and ruining the countryside.**
70% of all food now passes through four companies; Tesco, Sainsbury, Morrison and Asda. This control over the food chain allows supermarkets to determine the price they pay to farmers, with farmers forced to take that price due to there being no other buyer left in the market place. This price-setting power, together with the requirement by supermarkets that farmers either supply them on a large scale or not at all, is behind the continuing industrialisation of agriculture. Big farmers are getting bigger to survive while small farmers are going bust, leading to prairie farming monoculture and unemployment.
- ∞ **Shopping at supermarkets supports factory farming, poor animal welfare and the spread of disease.**
Due to public pressure, the UK now has some of the highest farm animal welfare standards in the world. This inevitably makes it more expensive to produce pork, chicken, etc, here than in countries with lower standards. So the supermarkets, who joined in the calls for a more humane British agriculture but whose first and last concern is profit, now source large amounts of the meat they sell from abroad, produced under conditions which would be illegal in this country. In an attempt to disguise these double standards, the supermarkets lie to their customers; it is standard practice for products carrying 'Union Jack' or 'Produce of the UK' stickers to have been processed/packed here but for the pig/chicken/beef/lamb to have been reared abroad. It is the long distance haulage of livestock, brought about by the insistence of supermarkets on using just a handful of mega-abattoirs, which was a major contributing factor to the spread of foot and mouth disease.
- ∞ **Shopping at supermarkets dismantles communities and undermines local economies.**
People can only eat so much food, so logic dictates that shopping at supermarkets puts village shops and high street stores out of business. Every supermarket that opens results in a net loss of 200-300 jobs, as a whole network of local shops and their suppliers is destroyed. Whereas money spent in independent shops tends to stay in the local economy, supermarkets act as giant vacuum cleaners; sucking money out of an area and putting it into the bank accounts of distant shareholders.
- ∞ **Shopping at supermarkets results in unnecessary, damaging and costly packaging waste.**
Due to the vast distances that supermarket food travels, the time it takes to make that journey, and the need for the product to be stacked on a shelf, dropped into a trolley and fitted with a barcode, supermarket food is encased in far more packaging than is used by local production and distribution networks. It was also the supermarkets who dictated that the returnable bottle disappeared; returnables only work on a regional basis, not the national and international scale of the supermarket. All of this leaves an ever growing waste mountain, much of which is multi-material (eg cardboard stuck to foil wrapped in plastic) and therefore impossible to recycle.

* Supermarket: any business responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing

This means it must be buried (to pollute the soil and water) or incinerated (to pollute the air), the cost of which is met by the taxpayer not the supermarkets.

∞ **Shopping at supermarkets undermines democracy and supports sleaze.**

Government policy on major issues which affect all our lives (road building programmes, development on greenfield sites, health and safety standards for foods) is dictated not by the public interest but by the needs of big business. And it doesn't matter who you vote for; Labour and Conservative MPs have vested interests in supermarkets and both parties rely on supermarkets and their supply chains for political donations.

∞ **Shopping at supermarkets exploits both the people and the land of developing countries.**

In their never ceasing quest to drive down prices paid to suppliers and so increase profits, supermarkets are increasingly sourcing the food they sell from the developing world where wages are low, working conditions poor and pollution laws non-existent. This leads to countries who can barely feed themselves seeing their best agricultural land producing food for UK supermarkets at rock bottom prices.

∞ **Shopping at supermarkets reduces both biodiversity in the countryside and choice for the consumer.**

It is often claimed that supermarkets increase choice, yet the reality is that they only do so when it suits their global view of the world. It is quite easy, for instance, for a supermarket to put 15 different brands of margarine on the shelves of all its stores. However, why is it that although there are 2,300 apple varieties and 550 pear varieties in the National Fruit Collection, you can only choose from a small handful of each in the supermarket? Because profit maximisation on a national scale dictates that the supermarkets tell farmers to grow two or three varieties in large enough quantities to supply all their stores. The result of this is more use of chemicals (less varieties equals greater threat from pests and diseases) and a subsequent loss of wildlife and threat to health.

∞ **Shopping at supermarkets reduces meals from being an important and enjoyable part of life to a refuelling exercise.**

The continual priority given to shelf life and uniformity of size/colour/shape over taste has resulted in supermarket produce being a bland imitation of what food can and should taste like. How many top chefs shop at supermarkets other than in the adverts?

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The only hope for Britain's farmers, the global environment and your community is for the UK to return to a position where no single business is responsible for more than 1% of UK food retailing. The only way this will be achieved is for the public to boycott supermarkets and instead support independent stores, farm shops, farmers markets, veg box schemes, food co-ops...

Despite the corporate might of the supermarket, the greatest power still lies in the hands of the individual - the power of the purse. Exercise this power and make the world a better place.

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For further details on supermarkets

www.breakingthearmlock.com

www.sustainweb.org

For help in finding alternatives to supermarkets

www.farmersmarkets.net

www.farmshopping.com

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