

Food

ENVIRONMENTAL FACT SHEET



We make decisions about what we eat every day, and these decisions can have big environmental implications. Producing food can use a lot of energy (producing greenhouse gas emissions), water and chemicals, and the distance that food travels to get to you also produces greenhouse gases. For example, a 150g serve of meat can take over 200 litres of water to produce, and creates 5kg of greenhouse gases (Australian Conservation Foundation and University of Sydney). Many food producing practices also have impacts on biodiversity and soil quality.

Acting now to eat as sustainably as possible will not only benefit the environment and assist the prevention of further climate change, it will help prepare for Peak Oil when demand for oil outstrips the world's supply. Petroleum prices are expected to rise considerably and will lead to higher food prices as the cost of growing, processing and transporting food increases.

Reducing the amount of pre-packaged and processed food that we eat, buying fresh fruit and vegetables that are in season and haven't travelled too far, and avoiding food waste are all great ways to reduce the environmental impact of our food. These sustainable eating actions also have many health benefits.

Residents are also encouraged to shop locally using sustainable transport, grow their own food at home, to compost their food scraps and recycle their food packaging where possible.

Food Miles

Food miles refers to the distance travelled by the food you eat, to get from where it was grown to your home, and the resulting greenhouse gas emissions from this travel. For an apple, it could be from the farm to the wholesale market to the market stall to your house. For a jar of pasta sauce, each ingredient is calculated from their individual farms to the factory, then the jar goes to a supermarket distribution centre, then the local supermarket, then to your home. Choosing locally grown food, growing fruit, vegetables and herbs at home or in a community garden, travelling locally and sustainably to purchase your food, and choosing less processed foods are all great ways to reduce your food miles.

Considering the food miles your food has travelled is an important consideration, but it is only one aspect of the life cycle of food which contributes to the environmental impact of what we eat. For example, rice grown in Australia does not travel as far as rice grown in Thailand, but there are issues surrounding the amount of water required to grow rice (flood irrigation) on such a dry continent as Australia. See Choice for a good analysis of food miles: www.choice.com.au/reviews-and-tests/food-and-health/labelling-and-advertising/sustainability/food-miles.aspx

Meat, Dairy and Seafood

Meat and dairy are very resource intensive in comparison to fruit, vegetables and grains when we consider the water, energy and fertiliser needed to grow the feed as well as the animal, and the water and energy involved in processing and packaging the product and the transport in every stage of the process. Eating one less serving of meat (150g) a week could save 10 000 litres of water and 300kg of greenhouse gas a year.

Minimise your meat and dairy intake, whilst still maintaining a healthy balanced diet.

Avoid eating endangered species of fish

Over 75% of world fisheries are overfished (Australian Marine Conservation Society). This can lead to endangered or even extinct species and damage to the marine ecosystem. Choosing sustainable and locally fished (food miles) species will help lessen our impact. Visit www.amcs.org.au to download a free 3-step pocket guide to choosing more sustainable seafood.

Avoid orange roughy, flake, tuna, swordfish, dory and scallops, and instead opt for whiting, bream, calamari and tropical trevally.

Organic Food

Food that has been grown without the use of synthetic chemicals (petro-chemical based fertilisers and pesticides) or genetically modified organisms can apply for organic certification. The quality of the soil, animal welfare and a balanced and healthy ecosystem at the farm are also requirements for certification.

Not only do synthetic chemicals require more energy-intensive production, they can be environmentally damaging to biodiversity, invading the life-cycle of many species and the food chain for the whole ecosystem. Synthetic chemicals can also pollute the waterways via farm runoff (causing algal blooms) and may be harmful to human health in concentrated form.

Genetically modified organisms (GM or GMO) can also put biodiversity at risk and lead to an increased use of herbicides and pesticides. Visit www.geneethics.org for more details.

Organic produce can be more expensive than conventional food, and will have high food miles if it has been imported. We suggest buying local, in season and less processed food in the first instance, and choosing organic produce wherever possible. Check labels to avoid genetically modified ingredients where listed.



Ethical Food Choices

As well as environmental impacts, you might also consider purchasing food on ethical grounds.

- Free-range for your eggs and meat (chicken and pork in particular). Free-range refers to open-pasture grazing for animals rather than small indoor cages or sheds, and the absence of many hormone and antibiotic drugs used in commercial farming.
- Fairtrade for tea, coffee and chocolate. Fairtrade ensures fair pay and conditions for the growers in developing countries where the products are sourced, and promotes sustainability. In the case of chocolate, it also certifies that child labour is not used.
- Ethical Supermarket Guide. This guide looks at the corporate behaviour (socially and environmentally) of the companies who produce many of our supermarket products, from toiletries and detergents to biscuits and milk and helps you to decide which brand to favour. www.ethical.org.au
- Avoid palm oil. Palm oil cultivation is destroying orang-utan habitat and pushing them towards extinction. Palm oil is in around 40% of products at the supermarket (Zoos Victoria), but labelling laws do not require it to be listed under this name. It appears as vegetable oil in foods and *Elaeis guineensis* in cosmetics. If the food product you are buying contains vegetable oil and has saturated fats (but no animal fats listed), this is most likely palm oil. Other vegetable oils do not contain saturated fats. Visit www.palmoilaction.org.au



Waste

- Make a meals plan, and a list, before you go shopping so you only buy what you will use. In 2004 Australians threw away \$5.3 billion of food, including fresh food, uneaten take away and leftovers
- Take your own bags with you. Not just the well-known "green bags" for carrying your shopping, but also look for re-useable bags for any fruit or vegetables that need to be in a bag, such as beans. Choose food that is less packaged and has recyclable rather than disposable packaging.
- Join a direct delivery service. Fruit, vegetables, and other items are purchased in bulk, then delivered to community hosts where customers can pick them up. Items are usually chosen on the merits of seasonality, paying a fair price to farmers, reduced food miles, and reduced environmental impact (eg. organic). Produce is supplied in boxes which are reused thus reducing packaging. Visit www.ceresfairfood.org.au
- Compost your food scraps, such as apple cores, potato peel and unwanted leftovers. Food waste accounts for around half the rubbish for the average Darebin resident, requiring more landfill space, producing the powerful greenhouse gas methane and requiring waste collection vehicles to travel longer distances. Compost will be great for the garden, especially if you grow your own food (reducing food miles to zero). Also, look at turning leftover or unwanted vegetables into soups or stock before sending them to the compost.

For more information from Darebin City Council go to:

www.darebin.vic.gov.au/environment email environment@darebin.vic.gov.au or call 8470 8405



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