

Industry slams report for 'excess' packaging slant

16 February 2008

Packaging industry chiefs have attacked the Sustainable Development Commission's (SDC) recommendations for a sustainable food chain for "perpetuating the idea there's so much excess packaging".

The Green, Healthy and Fair review, published today (16 February), seeks to persuade government to "harness the power of supermarkets" to help fight obesity, waste, climate change and fair trade issues.

Professor Tim Lang, an SDC commissioner, accused ministers of "being too soft" and "hiding behind retailers" on the issue of waste, and urged the government to "be more ambitious" in its collaboration.

"Supermarkets are very good at pushing waste upstream, and downstream to consumers by encouraging excessive consumption," he said.

However, among the review's recommendations is the development of a 'Packaging Strategy', following on from the Waste Strategy for England published last May.

The goal, SDC said, would be to "set out a clear ambition and identify policies and measures" to reduce packaging waste at source and encourage efficient use of compostable packaging.

Jane Bickerstaffe, director of the Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment (Incpen), said it was "frustrating" that the same arguments about packaging were being repeated, and was "really surprised" that the SDC had not done more research into the data it used.

Bickerstaffe said she did support giving the Packaging (Essential Requirements) Regulations "more teeth", but said that food packaging was

one of the areas where a lot of work had already been done.

She said the review perpetuated the idea that "there's so much excess packaging".

"Let's go for excess packaging, but you'd be hard pressed to find any around supermarkets," she added.

Packaging Federation chief executive Dick Searle criticised the review for "mentioning food waste, but focusing more on packaging".

He criticised the SDC for "not taking the time and trouble" to better understand the issue, and said the review "failed to recognise the type of society we live in".

Searle did, however, "absolutely agree" with the need for the government to work with local authorities to improve the consistency of recycling and composting schemes.

The review also questions the impact of the Courtauld Commitment (CC), the voluntary agreement signed between retailers and the Waste & Resources Action Programme (Wrap) in 2005 to reduce waste.

Lang said the CC "was not working or delivering on its own terms" and called for legal enforcement.

But Richard Swannell, Wrap director of retail and organic programmes, defended the CC, saying it was "progressing remarkably well". "Industry has taken a voluntary agreement and is giving it its best shot."

He welcomed the review for highlighting the issues of food and packaging waste, but said that a lot of work was already being done to tackle it.

"You can't help but be impressed by how innovative the packaging sector is when faced [with this] challenge," he said.

For a copy of the report visit www.sd-commission.org.uk, or call 020 7270 8498.