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What is eco-labelling?

Eco-labels are labelling systems meant for communicating and marketing a product's environmental credentials.

Eco-labels are a valuable tool which can enable consumers to make more informed decisions about the products they buy based on their environmental footprint, helping them to make choices which align more closely with their diet and values¹.

There are currently more than 450 voluntary environmental labels used globally, and at least 230 in Europe¹. Eco-labelling organisations include the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Rainforest Alliance.

While there are currently no internationally agreed standards for environmental sustainability labelling and no agreement on what sustainable production should measure, authorities at the EU and national levels within Europe are discussing the development of a common eco-label that would inform consumers about the impact that food products have on the environment and society.

Additionally, at the EU level, the European Commission is proposing to introduce a method to force companies to validate their claims through a "Product Environmental Footprint" – a methodology for calculating the environmental impact of a product over its lifetime. The Commission also wants to table its own sustainable labelling network, at the same time as banning the introduction of new public labelling schemes which haven't been developed at the EU level, and private schemes showing insufficient levels of environmental ambition.



Labels can have a positive influence on consumer decision-making

Research on nutrition labels has shown that labels can shift consumer decision-making for the better², by making healthier food choices more obvious for consumers for example, but labels alone do not have the power to drive population-level changes that are needed¹.

Labels on their own are unlikely to, for example, motivate consumers to stop eating animal-based products or to choose the organic variety of a product when it is simultaneously the more expensive option.

To have the most positive impact, eco-labelling should therefore be part of a package of interventions, including an increase in the availability of more sustainable choices and public information campaigns about the need for sustainable choices, if we want to have a greener future¹.

From our research, it's clear that there is widespread support for an independent, universal, and evidence-based logo for sustainable food products and for the responsibility for validating green claims to be in the hands of an independent party. It is likely the best way to combat the deluge of eco-labels, stop greenwashing and empower consumers to make informed choices about their real impact on the environment^{3,4}.

This whitepaper showcases current consumer perceptions around eco-labels and explores the potential benefits of a universal label, from the perspective of the consumer.



About the study

Data from the EIT Food TrustTracker® 2023 forms the basis of the information in this whitepaper.

The TrustTracker® is an evidence-based and peer-reviewed study that maps European consumers' trust in the food value chain across countries and over time.

A total of 18,000 participants took part in the 2023 study. Participants were European food consumers over 18 years of age, across 18 countries. The samples were nationally representative in terms of age, gender and region.

One module within the 2023 TrustTracker® study explores consumer trust in sustainability labels, and the findings are showcased within this whitepaper. A total of 9,000 participants took part in this module. This whitepaper also features data gathered from other Consumer Observatory studies, and scientific literature.



Current state: eating sustainably and healthily

Eating healthily

Almost a fifth of European consumers (17%) never or rarely choose healthy foods.



About a quarter (24%) sometimes choose healthy foods.



60% mostly or always choose healthy foods.



Eating sustainably

About half of European consumers (49%) currently claim to mostly or always choose sustainable foods.



A quarter (25%) say that they choose sustainable foods some of the time.



Another quarter (26%) never or rarely choose sustainable foods.



There is a clear desire from consumers to be better informed about the sustainability of food products

More than half of European consumers (56%) currently believe that they know too little about the sustainability of their food.

Consumers with an elementary level of education (or less) are slightly more confident, with just under half (49%) stating that they know too little.

The good news, however, is that the majority (66%) is keen on understanding more about the sustainability of their food. Consumers with a higher level of education seem to be slightly more interested than consumers with a lower level of education (68% for those with a university education expressed an interest compared to 60% of those with a high school education or less).

Consumers from southern European countries (Italy, Turkey and Greece) score especially highly in wanting to be better informed (around 70%).



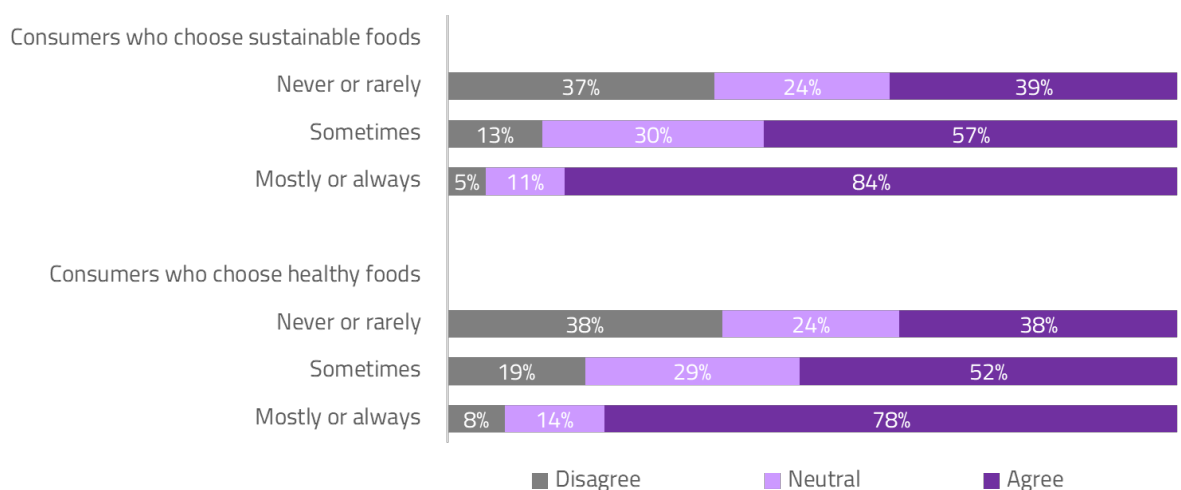
Consumers who are already health and sustainability conscious show more desire to be better informed

A total of 84% of consumers who mostly or often choose sustainable foods would like to know more about the environmental credentials of the foods they buy. This is much higher than the 39% of consumers who never or rarely choose sustainable foods.

Similar trends appear with consumers who mostly or always choose healthy food options, with 78% of this group wanting to better understand how sustainable certain foods are. Those who never or rarely choose healthy foods are also much less keen on learning more about the sustainability of their food (38%).

This means that efforts to persuade consumers towards more sustainable and healthier food choices are mostly spent on making the already sustainable consumers more sustainable, rather than making those that are not sustainable, more sustainable. The latter group are generally less interested in receiving information about sustainability.

I would like to know more about the sustainability of food products before I buy them



The information that is currently available to consumers is insufficient

There are too many eco-labels, and they vary in scope and quality.

There is already a plethora of trusted labels available on the European market. Unfortunately, this is also part of the problem: in one of our qualitative studies on green claims, consumers expressed that they felt that they are exposed to too many labels, so they feel confused, rather than helped by them⁵. Additionally, consumers were asked about how they would feel if a universal label were to be introduced, but a reason that around a third (32%) of consumers would not use it was because “yet another label” would make it more difficult for them to identify sustainable products. Consumers seem to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of labels that are currently out there^{1,5}.

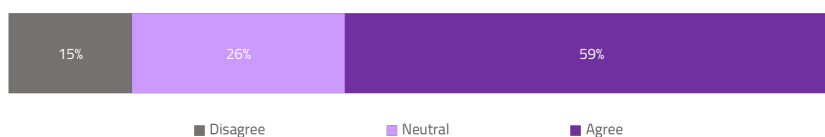
Adding to the problem is that not all eco-labels are created equal. Some cover more aspects of sustainability than others. Some labels are also less transparent in the criteria they use than others, adding to the confusion consumers have¹.

The information available is often considered conflicting.

With the large number of eco-labels available to consumers, more than half (59%) perceive they are experiencing conflicting information. The Irish (67%), Dutch (65%), and British (65%) consumers experience this the most.

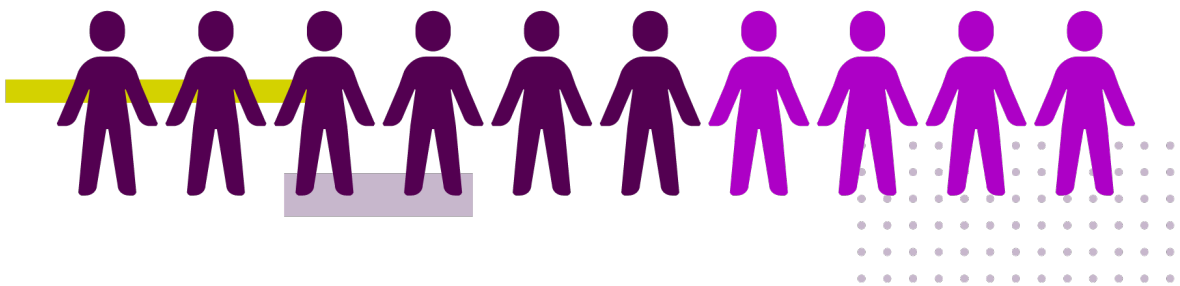
There is a relationship between education and the extent to which consumers perceive they are experiencing conflicting information. The higher the education, the more conflicts are experienced. Among those with a basic education level (elementary school), just under half (48%) reports experiencing conflicting information, compared to 60% of those with a college or university degree and 62% of those with a post graduate degree.

Information about the sustainability of a food product is often conflicting



Labels are often not trusted

Being trusted is an important condition for labels to be effective. But consumers often do not trust the integrity of eco-labels. Four in ten consumers find sustainability labels untrustworthy.



In Denmark, consumers trust labels the most, with two thirds believing in the integrity of these labels. Of those who follow a vegan diet, just over half feel distrustful towards sustainability labels. This is higher compared to non-vegans.

Part of this lack of trust comes from a lack of provision for consumers to be able to validate the claims they see on labels.

With such lack of trust, it is therefore not surprising that almost two-thirds find it difficult to understand how sustainable a certain food product is (62%).

Younger consumers under the ages of 35 report experiencing less difficulty (55%) compared to consumers over the ages of 65 (68%).



Still, sustainability labels are relied upon

Labels function as important sustainability cues for consumers.

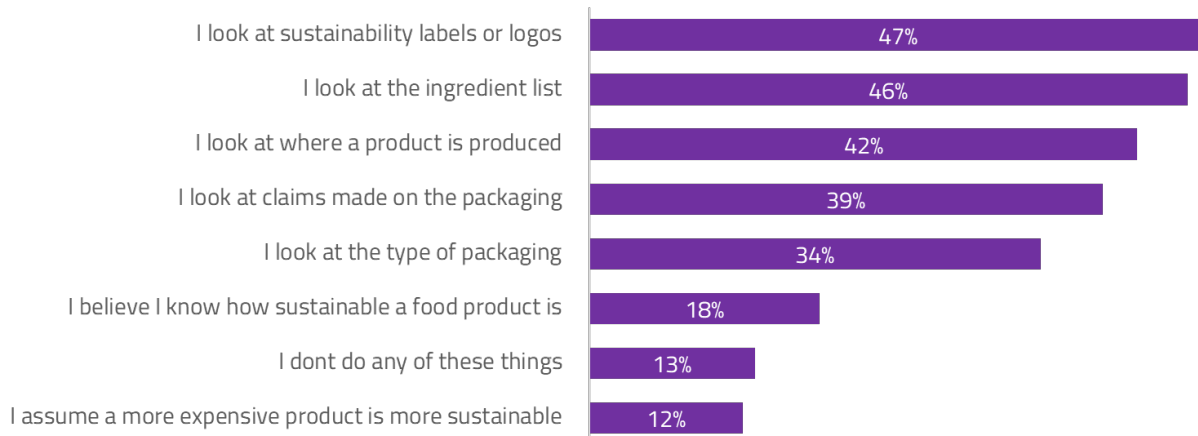
A product's external characteristics such as the packaging type, design and colours are extremely important for consumer decision-making. Consumers use these characteristics as cues to quickly judge how sustainable a product is, often doing so automatically⁶. But, when consumers look more closely at a product and try to make a rational decision, they tend to heavily rely on other sustainability characteristics as well.

Almost half of consumers (47%) state that they currently use sustainability labels.

This percentage is higher for consumers who tend to choose healthy and sustainable food options already (63% and 55% respectively). Noticeably, the higher the level of education, the more consumers look at sustainability labels; only a quarter (25%) of consumers who have some high school education or less look at labels, as opposed to more than half (51%) of consumers with a post graduate degree.

A similar proportion of consumers (46%) look at the product's ingredient list, while 42% look at where a product is produced to assess its sustainability credentials. Less than a fifth (18%) say that they rely on their own existing knowledge to judge a product's sustainability.

How consumers identify sustainable food products



Governments need to work on improving their perceived trustworthiness

Trust in the government, especially regarding sustainability regulations, is low. The European Commission is currently working on developing two workstreams to help improve consumer trust in sustainability labels. First is the Green Claims Directive, with which the Commission aims to make environmental claims reliable, comparable and verifiable. Second is a sustainable food labelling framework, which is about the provision of consumer information related to nutritional, climate, environment and social aspects of food⁷.

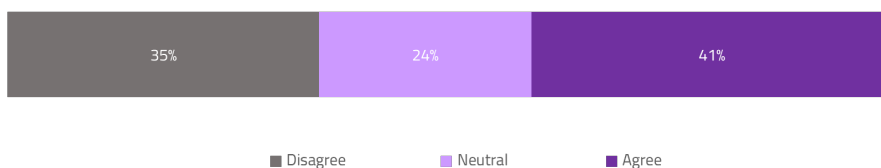
Currently, however, less than half of European consumers (41%) believe that their government is capable of validating and regulating sustainability certifications on food packaging. This is much lower for Czech consumers, only about a quarter of whom report believing this (27%). Czech consumers are among the most sceptical consumers in this aspect, along with Portuguese consumers (30%), and Romanian consumers (32%). On the other hand, Irish consumers are more trusting. Ireland is the only country where more than half (52%) believe their government to be capable of validating and regulating sustainability labels. Spanish consumers rank second in this regard (48%).

Many consumers do not believe that their governments are transparent.

Only a third of consumers believe that their governments are transparent about regulating sustainability labels on food. Again, Czech consumers seem to be less trusting, with only about a fifth (21%) believing that their government is transparent in this regard.

Such distrust from European consumers is also not helped by the fact that only around a third of consumers (32%) believe that their government listens to public concerns regarding sustainability regulations.

Governments are capable of regulating and validating sustainability labels on food packaging



A European sustainability label would be welcomed

The majority of European consumers (67%) report that they are likely to use an international sustainability label when choosing food. Italian consumers in particular are keen on such a label (81%), while Czech consumers are the least interested (45%).

Again, education level seems to play a large role: two thirds (76%) of consumers with a post graduate degree would welcome such a label, as opposed to just over half (56%) of consumers with some high-school education or less.

Only a small group of consumers (13%) report that they would likely not use an international sustainability label – in particular, consumers who never or rarely choose healthy or sustainable foods seem to not be keen on an international label (36% and 20% respectively).

Three main reasons why consumers don't use an international sustainability label:

- Some consumers do not find sustainability important when purchasing food (43%). Notably, 56% of people in Israel mention that sustainability is less important than other elements such as price or quality, which is higher than in other countries.
- Around a third would not trust such a label (35%). In particular, Italian consumers would not trust the label, even though this group is also the keenest on having an international label in the first place.
- Consumers are wary that this will become yet another label added to the plethora of existing labels, making decision-making even harder than it already is.

What consumers would use a European sustainability label for:

Consumers can picture themselves using an international sustainability label to be able to differentiate between different food categories, for example, deciding whether to buy minced meat or to buy lentils instead as a replacement for meat (71%), and for understanding the differences between different brands or types of products (for example, using organic or free-range or conventional pork) (84%). An international label would therefore make the sustainability of food categories, food products, and food brands easier to compare with one another, which up until now is considered to be a difficult feat.

Consumers want a label that represents a broad range of sustainability criteria

The word “sustainability” is an umbrella term

Consumers each perceive the word “sustainability” differently, depending on the values that are important to them personally. For instance, consumers that find animal welfare particularly important, will look at labels specifically related to that for assessing a product’s sustainability. Others will look closely at other characteristics of a product, such as the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). This shows that sustainability, for consumers, is seen as an umbrella term, and that sustainability means different things to different consumers.

Consumers don’t agree with scientists about what should be included

When asked what consumers want to have included in a European sustainability label, it seems that consumers find the recyclability of packaging the most important (90%), followed by animal welfare (89%), and then pollution and the use chemicals and fertilisers (88%). Notably, scientists are generally not in agreement with the first two options that consumers seem to find most important. Sustainability labels must therefore take into account consumer views, as otherwise they may be disregarded.

What do consumers want to see in a European sustainability logo?



Recommendations for successful eco-labelling practices

Ideally, a universal eco-label should make most existing labels redundant. Consumers are overwhelmed by the number of labels on the market, and to make decision-making easier consumers would benefit from having fewer options.

Besides the Product Environmental Footprint criteria, a universal eco-label should include a host of other considerations, as consumers see sustainability as an umbrella term for various social and environmental considerations. Consumers find the recyclability of packaging, animal welfare, and pollution from the use of chemicals the three most important topics, so a universal label should consider these aspects.

Eco-labels are most likely to be successful in making consumers who are already sustainability and health-conscious more so than they already are. For consumers with little interest in becoming more sustainable, other measures will be necessary. For instance, sustainable food options could become the default option more often⁸ or be sold or advertised as a luxury food item⁹, among other interventions.

Governmental organisations should continue to work on building consumer trust in the food system. Any development of a universal eco-label should adhere closely to the two workstreams the European Commission is advancing (the Green Claims Directive and the sustainable food labelling framework). It is important that consumers can easily verify information that they see on food packaging.

Eco-labels are also more likely to be effective with consumers who have a higher level of education compared to those with a lower level of education. For those with a lower level of education, more interventions will be necessary. This group of consumers would first need to be convinced why they should make more sustainable food decisions, likely by highlighting the direct benefits of eating sustainably (e.g., lower blood cholesterol from reduced meat consumption) rather than the social benefits (e.g., animal welfare).

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About the Consumer Observatory

The Consumer Observatory, powered by EIT Food, drives food systems transformation by providing consumer insights and guidance for agrifood stakeholders and offering market trend services to enable informed actions and decision-making toward a healthier, more sustainable and resilient future. [Find out more here.](#)

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