

Briefing



**Friends of
the Earth**

Greening the Red Tractor

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Friends of the Earth

26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ

Tel: 020 7490 1555 Fax: 020 7490 0881 Email: info@foe.co.uk Website: www.foe.co.uk

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Introduction

In June 2000, a new food mark - the British Farm Standard - was launched. The logo is a Red Tractor and is being heavily promoted as providing assurance that food bearing the mark has been produced to high environmental, animal welfare and safety standards.

The scheme as a whole is operated by Assured Food Standards Ltd, which claims that the standards “cover all aspects of production on the farm from looking after the countryside to food hygiene and safety, what animals are fed and how they are cared for”¹. Ben Gill, President of the National Farmers Union has been quoted as saying: “The British Farm Standard is a promise to consumers that all foods carrying the little red and blue tractor logo have been produced to the highest possible standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental care.”².

However, Friends of the Earth does not believe that, as it currently stands, the Red Tractor scheme provides any real assurance that the food is produced to any higher standard than other food on shop shelves. In fact, it may even be produced to lower standards. Nor is there good evidence that all farmers joining the scheme will see a real benefit. Friends of the Earth would support a branding initiative to help farmers out of the current crisis in farming by promoting food produced to high environmental, animal welfare and safety standards, but feels that the scheme, as it stands, fails to live up to its promises to both to farmers and consumers. This briefing sets out what FOE believes is the challenge for the Red Tractor scheme - to help UK farmers farm with the environment, animal welfare and food safety in mind.

How it works

The Red Tractor mark is run by a private company and encompasses other existing farm assurance schemes - Assured Combinable Crops (cereals), Assured Produce (fruit, vegetables and salads), Assured British Meat, Beef and Lamb Schemes, National Dairy Farm Assurance Scheme, Assured Chicken Production, Assured British Pigs and associated pig meat schemes³.

Does the Red Tractor live up to its promise to consumers?

The National Farmers Union claims the Red Tractor mark “makes it easier for shoppers to spot food produced under British “farm assurance” schemes to exacting standards of food safety, kindness to animals and environmental protection”⁴. But Friends of the Earth’s analysis of the scheme suggests that the standards are not nearly as exacting as consumers are being led to believe.

GM Free

Friends of the Earth believes that the Red Tractor mark must not be used on GM food or food containing GM ingredients

Consumers have made it very clear that they do not want GM food and as a result most major supermarkets have ensured that their own brand foods are GM free. By contrast, food displaying the little red tractor is not guaranteed to be GM free. In fact, the Red Tractor Scheme does not rule out the use of GM crops and animals may be fed GM animal feed. For example the Assured Combinable

Crops scheme includes instructions for the separate storage and correct labelling of GM crops despite the fact that commercial growing of GM crops is not allowed in the UK.

Pesticides

Friends of the Earth believes that the Red Tractor scheme should set targets for pesticide residue reduction and prohibit the use of pesticides with strong evidence of harm to human health and the environment

A National Opinion Poll, conducted for FOE, found that 85% of shoppers do not want pesticide residues in their food. About half of the fruit and veg sold in supermarkets contains pesticide residues, and pesticides are also found frequently in other foods like wholemeal bread.

Despite Ben Gill's claims that the British Farm Standard uses the highest standards of environmental care, pesticides are used in the production of the food. Both the Co-op and Marks and Spencer recently announced that they had gone beyond statutory requirements and banned suppliers from using pesticides of particular environmental or human health concern, but this is not true of food certified under the Red Tractor scheme. While farmers are encouraged to reduce pesticide use, they are given little advice on how to do this and any approved pesticide can still be used. The scheme allows farmers to use pesticides which have been identified by the European Commission as damaging to human health because of the way they disrupt hormones in the body.

For example, under the Red Tractor rules, two pesticides (Fentin acetate and linuron) which are on the EC's highest priority list of hormone disruptors are allowed for use on potatoes⁵. Two other pesticides (thiram and zineb) on this list are allowed for use on lettuces. Lindane can be used on strawberries, despite the fact that a European Union ban is planned because of concerns about its safety.

A recent report from the Government's Pesticides Residues Committee, covering the period July - September 2000, found that a sample of lettuce bought at Morrisons supermarket contained residues of three different pesticides, one of which - propamocarb - was 50 per cent above the legal limit. The supermarket commented that:

*"The consignment has been traced back to two growers concerned who are both members of the Assured Produce Scheme. Full records are kept of all pesticide applications, these indicate the correct use of propamocarb and adherence to harvest intervals and other aspects of Good Agricultural Practice."*⁶

The growers had done everything they were asked to by the assured produce scheme. But their produce not only contained pesticide residues, it contained residues above the legal limit. The Red Tractor scheme did not protect the growers - by following its guidelines they still found their produce was over legal limits - and it cannot provide real assurance to consumers that this food is safer than the rest.

Animal welfare

Friends of the Earth believes that the Red Tractor scheme should not allow factory farming and should promote the very highest standards of animal welfare

A survey by Which? magazine⁷ found that some people believed that the red tractor logo on a pack of chicken meat meant that the chickens were free-range. But the mark in fact applies to all systems of poultry production, including intensive broiler systems.

The assurance scheme chosen to be part of the Red Tractor scheme for poultry meat production is an industry sponsored scheme. The standards for chickens being reared for meat provided by Assured Chicken Production⁸, allow a basic stocking density of 34kg/m² (around 18 birds per m²). But a report by the EU Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Welfare⁹ states that

“It is clear from the behaviour and leg disorder studies that the stocking density must be 25 kg/m² or lower for major welfare problems to be largely avoided and that above 30 kg/m², even with very good environmental control systems, there is a steep rise in the frequency of serious problems.”

In other words, the EU Committee recommended a maximum stocking rate of 30 kg/m² for broiler chickens - lower than the basic stocking rate used under the Red Tractor rules.

High Standards?

There is, as yet, no guarantee that food stamped with the Red Tractor logo will be produced to the highest standards. For example, the Government's scientific advisory committee on BSE has recommended that no livestock are fed meat from their own species - ie that they should not be turned into cannibals¹⁰. But in spring 2001 it emerged that pigs fed with swill had been eligible for the Red Tractor scheme (this has now been revoked).¹¹ As catering waste is used in the production of swill, this could have contained pork products.

Under scrutiny

At present, promoters of the Red Tractor scheme are making claims for it that are not backed up by the evidence. Even the Government doesn't believe them. In December 2000, the Government's Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment made the following comments about the Red Tractor symbol¹²:

“It was not clear that the schemes involved merited the claims being made... They appeared to incorporate only minimum legal requirements on the environment.

Claims of this kind could be counterproductive ... It would be in the schemes' interests for improvements to be made, to help them gain the confidence of consumers.

The existence of product labels like the Red Tractor could undermine of the sort of schemes ACCPE would like to see.”

Those promoting the Red Tractor scheme, such as the National Farmers Union, continue to make claims about the environment and animal welfare value of the scheme. But it would seem that the produce is little different to the vast majority of British produce, and may well be produced to lower standards than, for example, food produced in line with the Co-op's pesticide protocols or organic food.

Does the Red Tractor Scheme really help farmers?

Friends of the Earth believes that the Red Tractor scheme should provide farmers and growers with real and measurable benefits

“...farm assurance schemes are a load of old cobblers. They cost a lot of money and prove nothing” Dick Lindley, Vice Chairman Wakefield National Farmers Union¹³

An Involuntary Scheme

It is claimed that the Red Tractor scheme will help farmers by providing them with a guaranteed market. It is vital that UK farmers are assured of a future, but it is not certain that the Red Tractor scheme will achieve this. While the scheme is voluntary, previous assurance schemes have led to farmers being forced into the scheme. For example, the Assured Combinable Crops Scheme (now covered by the Red Tractor mark) became effectively mandatory for farmers when grain mills started giving preference to grain from farms in the scheme. By 2000, major millers and feed companies were only buying grain from farmers in the scheme.¹⁴ Farmers seeking to supply these markets had little choice but to join.

No Premium

There is no price premium for food carrying the red tractor logo. Because the scheme does not require any higher standards than those currently enforced by law and expected of competent farmers and growers, there is no incentive to pay more for food with the symbol. While it may secure some market share, it is unclear whether farmers will gain a real benefit relative to the extra costs, which include joining fees and increased paperwork.

Poor Support for Local Farmers

There is an increasing interest from consumers in buying fresh locally produced food - as demonstrated by the enormous popularity of farmers markets. The Red Tractor scheme does not identify to the consumer whether or not the food they are buying has been produced locally or has travelled across the country.

Favouring Larger Farmers

It has been suggested that such schemes favour larger farmers, as the costs of compliance (eg time spent doing paperwork) are disproportionately higher for smaller farmers¹⁵. The registration costs are also disproportionately high, for example registration for the Assured Combinable Crops scheme costs £3.28 per ha up to 29 hectares but only £1.40 per ha over 250 hectares.

What Friends of the Earth is calling for

Friends of the Earth believes that the current Red Tractor symbol is misleading to consumers as it offers few tangible benefits to farmers, animal welfare or the environment. FOE believes the scheme should be reformed so that it is relevant to the needs of farmers and consumers. FOE completely supports any initiative which clearly labels British food produced to a high standard so that consumers can make informed choices, giving recognition to farmers who are following high environmental and welfare standards. However, such a label could only apply to foods which are of a standard well

above the minimum legal requirements and FOE considers that the Red Tractor currently falls well short of delivering such a label.

Friends of the Earth believe that the Little Red Tractor needs a major overhaul including (as a minimum):

- targets for pesticide reduction and prohibition of those pesticides with strongest evidence of harm
- food to be GM free
- food to be British and labelled to show county or region of origin
- livestock to be raised to standards in accordance with the Freedom Foods mark

The overhaul of the Red Tractor should include participation of consumers and of a diverse group of farmers/growers as well as public interest groups. It is essential that there is regular monitoring and adequate enforcement of how the scheme is working.

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