

Media Briefing

November 2005

BRITAIN'S SUPERMARKETS STILL NOT SUPPORTING NATIVE APPLES

UK supermarkets claim to want to increase the amount of apples that they source from the UK [1]. Friends of the Earth has put these claims to the test by carrying out its fourth annual survey of apple sourcing in UK supermarkets [2]. The survey looked at the country of origin and the varieties of apple on sale in the "big five" supermarkets and in greengrocers during October 2005 – the peak of the UK apple season.

For the fourth year running Friends of the Earth found that the majority of apples sold in UK supermarkets during apple season were from outside the UK. Only about one third (35 per cent) were sourced from the UK, compared to nearly half (49 per cent) in local greengrocers. Thirty two per cent of apple varieties were sourced from outside the EU – twice as many as the last time Friends of the Earth undertook this survey two years ago (when Tesco and Asda only sourced 16% from outside the EU).

Friends of the Earth is concerned that with the increasing dominance of the supermarket retailers in the high street (some 2,000 independent shops have closed in the last year alone), the market and indeed the opportunities for consumers to buy native apples are disappearing. This has consequences for the diversity of our farmed land and rural economies, as well as also resulting in increased climate emissions from unnecessary food miles.

Tesco – a bad apple

Tesco has been particularly vociferous over the past year in promoting its commitment to the UK apple. The retail giant sponsored the National Fruit Show and funded conservation work into vintage apples and work on how they can be brought back into shops. In October this year, it announced its intention to double sales of UK apples over the next three years [3].

But Tesco came bottom of Friends of the Earth's supermarket league table for UK sourcing (see Table 1 below). In the Tesco outlets surveyed, only 28 per cent of the apple varieties came from the UK. This is significantly worse than in 2003, when we found that 42 per cent of their apples were from British sources. Then, Tesco claimed: "*we don't import from August through to February from any of the Southern Hemisphere countries*", but now Tesco stores were found to be selling apples from New Zealand, Chile and South Africa. Overall 26 per cent of Tesco's apple lines were found to be sourced from outside the EU. If, as Tesco's claimed, these apples are not being imported during this time, the supermarket must be selling stored imported apples.

It seems that Tesco's enthusiasm for UK apples can most effectively be summed up by the advertisement that they ran in the Guardian in October 2005 promoting their most important apple line – the Granny Smith, which is mainly grown in Australia and New Zealand.

Key results

- Overall, 35 per cent of supermarket apple lines were sourced from the UK. This is a slight fall from the figure of 38 per cent in 2003 (when only Tesco and Asda were surveyed). Tesco, the UK's biggest retailer, showed the biggest fall (28 per cent as opposed to 42 per cent in 2003).
- In 2003 Tesco claimed that they didn't import any apples from Southern Hemisphere countries during the growing season. In this study one quarter of Tesco's apples were from countries outside the EU. If they are not being imported at this time, these must be apples which are imported, stored, then sold during the UK season
- In all the supermarkets surveyed, nearly one third of apples (32 per cent) were sourced from outside the EU, compared to 16 per cent in 2003 (when only Tesco and Asda were surveyed).
- The total number of varieties of UK apple in the supermarkets surveyed was 25 compared to 51 in the greengrocers surveyed. Nearly three times as many supermarkets were surveyed as greengrocers. There are over 2,000 different varieties of UK apple (See www.brogdale.org)
- Just over one half of the supermarket stores surveyed had organic apples on sale - but less than one fifth (18 per cent) of organic supermarket apple lines were from the UK. The majority (56 per cent) were from outside the EU.

Supporting UK growers?

In store, the supermarkets appear to be supporting home grown fruit. Signs in the stores in this survey advertised "Season's Choice – British Cox Apples," "British and in Season" and "Celebrating Homegrown Produce." Such advertisements are of benefit to the British fruit grower, the consumer and the countryside. But Friends of the Earth warned that if the stores only stocked a limited supply of British apples, buried under a mountain of imported Golden Delicious, they are only be of limited benefit.

Government figures show that the area of planted apples in the UK has nearly halved over the last 10 years [4]. Supermarkets claim that they are trying to increase the amount of apples sourced from the UK, but if our orchards are to be re-planted growers will need to be confident that they can make a decent living. English growers continue to complain of profit margins that are "wafer thin or zero,"[5]. Squeezed ever more by the supermarkets, they now appear to be turning to outlets which make fewer unreasonable demands as to the cosmetic appearance of the fruit, like farmers markets [6].

Table 1: Percentage of apple lines sourced from UK, EU and non-EU in different outlet types (non-organic only)

Outlet type	UK %	EU %	Non-EU%	Unknown %
Supermarkets (total)	35	31	32	2
Greengrocers	49	26	22	3

Table 2: Percentage of apple lines sourced from UK, EU and non-EU in different supermarkets (non-organic only)

Supermarket	UK %	EU %	Non-EU%	Unknown %
Somerfield	42	25	30	3
Sainsburys	40	25	33	1
Morrisons	32	29	38	>1
Asda	30	29	39	2
Tesco	28	44	26	2

2. Consumer choice – varieties

There are over 2,000 varieties of UK apples at the National Fruit Collection, including little known varieties such as Laxton's Superb or Adam's Pearmain, but most of these are no longer grown commercially. Some, like the Knobby Russett may not achieve the cosmetic perfection of the Granny Smith. Some may be too bitter for modern-day tastes. But the supermarkets have decided that the UK consumer is only interested in a very few varieties – varieties that coincidentally are tough enough to travel long distances to supermarket shelves.

Friends of the Earth survey 181 supermarkets and 63 greengrocers. The average number of UK apple varieties per supermarket store was 3.6, while local greengrocers had an average of 3.4. But twice as many varieties of apple were found overall in the greengrocers. It was also noted that UK varieties available in the supermarket stores, were often also available as imports. For example, a Tesco store in Stafford offered UK Gala apples as well as Galas from Chile, France, Germany and the US.

In 2003, Tesco told Farming Today that "...our policy is to source British wherever possible, we've got 20 different varieties of British apples and pears in store throughout the British season." In this study, the average number of UK varieties per store was just 2.4. A total of 10 different varieties of UK-sourced apples were found in the 58 Tesco stores surveyed. Neither Tesco or Asda showed any significant improvement in the number of UK varieties of apple available since the last survey in 2003.

Table 3: Average numbers of apple varieties stocked per shop/ stall by outlet type (excluding organic) in 2003 and 2005

Outlet type	Average number of varieties per store (2003)	Average number of varieties per store (2005)
Tesco	3	2.4
Asda	4	3.9
Greengrocers	3	3.4

Table 4: Total and average number of UK varieties stocked per store by outlet type (2005)

Outlet type	Total number of UK varieties available in outlet type	Average number of UK varieties per store
Supermarkets (total)	25	3.6
Greengrocers	51	3.4

Table 5: Total and average number of varieties and UK varieties stocked per supermarket store (2005)

Outlet type	Total number of UK varieties available in outlet type	Average number of UK varieties per store
Sainsburys	20	4.8
Morrisons	10	4.3
Asda	15	3.9
Somerfield	10	3.4
Tesco	10	2.4

3. Consumer choice - organic

Supermarkets remain the main source for organic apples, which were available in 56 per cent of the supermarkets surveyed. Sainsbury did particularly well, selling organic apples in 80 per cent of the 50 outlets visited. Asda had also improved significantly. In 2003 organic apples were not available in any of their stores, but in 2005 the survey found organic apples in half of the Asda stores surveyed. But just nine per cent of Asda's organic apples were from the UK.

In September 2005, a survey by the organic organisation, the Henry Doubleday Research Association, found that many consumers who buy organic produce would prefer them to come from local or UK sources. The survey concluded that there was potential for increasing the UK share of organic produce to up to 100 per cent during the growing season [7]. But supermarkets continue to source the vast majority of their organic apples from overseas. Only 18 per cent of the organic lines in total came from the UK, and more than half (56%) were shipped in from outside the EU.

Percentage of organic apples sourced from UK, EU and non-EU

Outlet type	% organic lines sourced UK	% organic lines sourced EU	% organic lines sourced non-EU
Supermarkets (total)	18	26	56
Asda	9	45	45
Morrisons	0	36	64
Sainsburys	19	30	51
Somerfield	0	0	100
Tesco	23	17	60
Greengrocers	100	0	0

ACTION NEEDED

Supermarkets should

- source more UK apples and more varieties when they are in season
- pay growers a fair price for their produce and reduce unnecessary packaging and transport.
- be more flexible about appearance standards so they can take more of the UK crop

Government should

- support local food initiatives in particular to help growers set up direct marketing ventures
- Introduce a strict Statutory Code of Practice to protect the interests of supermarket suppliers
- set up an independent watchdog to protect both consumer and producer interests

Consumers should

- buy UK apples when they are in season, and buy local and direct from the grower where possible.
- support local independent stores,

NOTES

[1] "Supermarkets challenge growers", The Fruit Grower, June 2005

[2] **Methodology:** Volunteers from 42 Friends of the Earth groups and two independent groups visited stores from Asda, Morrisons, Sainsburys, Somerfield and Tesco as well as local greengrocers across the UK. Stores were visited in every English region (except NE), Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The data was collected in 15 October 2005 when then there should have been plenty of UK produce available.

Volunteers noted the country of origin and variety of apples on sale. We then measured the proportion of UK produce by counting the number of lines from the UK and compared this with lines from the EU and outside the EU. For example if a store sold three sorts of Coxes apples, of which one was from the UK and two were French this would be counted as one UK and two EU. Volunteers also noticed down any information available on regional/ local sourcing in the store or advertisements promoting UK apples.

Total number of stores visited:

Asda 20

Morrisons 22

Sainsburys 50

Somerfield 31

Tesco 58

Greengrocers 63

[3] Tesco is to fund conservation work at Brogdale Horticultural Trust, Kent to bring vintage apples back into shops. The trust has 2,000 varieties. Some, including the Knobby Russett and the Bloody Ploughman, has been deemed unsuitable for today's trust. The British apple market is worth £320 million a year.

[4] Defra statistics: in 1994/5 16,178 ha were covered by apple orchards in the UK. In 2004/5 predicted figures indicate that 9,150 are covered by apple orchards. Calculated from figures at <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/publications/bhs/2005/fruit.pdf>

[5] "Retailer's responsibility" The Fruit Grower, October 2005

[6] "Competing with imports", The Fruit Grower, April 2005

[7] Reported in The Grower, 8 September 2005