

Sustainability Committee

SC(3)-11-08 (p2): 22 May 2008

Paper from Waste and Resources Action Programme on its work on carrier bags""

Purpose

This paper summarises the role of the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), and our involvement in the UK Government's current voluntary agreement with the retail sector to reduce the environmental impact of carrier bags.

Background

Introduction to WRAP

WRAP is a not-for-profit company that is grant-funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, and Defra. WRAP was created in 2001 as one of the actions arising from the UK Government's "Waste Strategy 2000". WRAP helps individuals, businesses and local authorities to reduce waste and recycle more, making better use of resources and helping to tackle climate change. WRAP operates seven main programmes, covering the construction, manufacturing, retail and organics sectors, local authority support, business growth and behavioural change.

Introduction to WRAP's Retail Programme

WRAP's Retail Programme was established as a result of research undertaken by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, which found that as much as 50% of the household waste that ultimately ends up in landfill has originated from a purchase from the top 5 retail supermarket chains. These supermarkets link massive supply chains with households' behaviour and are therefore well placed to influence change. The Programme therefore engages with the leading retailers, brand owners and their supply chain to identify collaborative approaches towards reducing the amount of food and packaging waste that ends up in the household bin. The central part of WRAP's strategy is a voluntary agreement, the Courtauld Commitment, described in more detail below.

The Courtauld Commitment

The Courtauld Commitment is an agreement between WRAP and the major grocery organisations which is intended to lead to new packaging solutions and technologies, so that less waste ends up in the household bin. Thirty one major retailers, brands and suppliers have joined the Courtauld Commitment since it was launched in July 2005.

Participants agree to support WRAP in the achievements of three objectives:

to design out packaging waste growth by 2008;

to deliver absolute reductions in packaging waste by 2010; and

to identify ways to tackle the problem of food waste.

WRAP's work on Carrier Bags

History of WRAP's involvement with carrier bags

WRAP has been involved in the carrier bag debate since 2004, when our role was expanded to include work on waste minimisation. Since then, we have run the 'Choose to Reuse' trials in Edinburgh and Bristol in the autumn of 2005, to encourage the re-use of bags, and have worked with the retail sector to reduce the environmental impact of the carrier bags that are given out.

Carrier bags are iconic of our throwaway society. Action by business and Government on this issue could help focus our attention on other key environmental issues such as the 5.9 million tonnes of packaging and the 6.7 million tonnes of food that are produced by households each year. This debate around carrier bags will lead to a wider awareness of our impact on the environment. Large benefits will be realised if it helps change our behaviour in other environmentally beneficial ways; for example, by wasting less and recycling more.

WRAP's role in the Voluntary Agreement on carrier bags

In March 2007, WRAP and other stakeholders agreed the following 'Joint Statement on Reducing the Environmental Impact of Carrier Bags':

"In response to Ministers from Defra, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Office, and in the context of widespread public interest, the UK Retail sector has agreed to take action and is proposing to adopt a shared objective with the government and WRAP to reduce the environmental impact of carrier bags by 25% by the end of 2008.

In becoming a signatory to this statement, retailers have agreed:

to work jointly with government and WRAP to monitor the environmental impact of carrier bags and to agree a baseline figure from which to measure reduction;

to work with the above parties to reduce the overall environmental impact by 25% by the end of 2008; and

to review experiences by the end of 2008 in order to determine what would be required in order to make a further reduction by 2010.

This will be achieved via the following routes:

by reducing the environmental impact of each individual carrier bag;

by encouraging customers to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags they use; and

by enabling the recycling of more carrier bags where appropriate.

Evaluation of the progress achieved so far is currently being undertaken and discussion between WRAP and the participating retailers will shortly take place to determine what activities and initiatives have been successful and what additional actions can be taken to further reduce the impact of carrier bags during the course of 2008 and beyond.

The following 21 organisations signed up to this voluntary agreement: Alliance Boots, Association of Convenience Stores, Booths, British Retail Consortium, Carrier Bag Consortium, Co-operative Group, Federation of Small Businesses Scotland, Home Retail Group, John Lewis Partnership & Waitrose, Marks & Spencer, Musgrave, Next Group plc, Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, Packaging and Industrial Films Association, Primark Stores Ltd, Sainsbury's, Scottish Grocers Federation, Somerfield, Spar (UK) Ltd, Tesco and WM Morrison."

Progress on the Voluntary Agreement

The voluntary agreement is being monitored by measuring reductions in the amount of virgin material that is used in bags given out, as a proxy for overall environmental impact. This methodology will be reviewed when the Environment Agency's life-cycle analysis on carrier bags is published, hopefully later this year. The baseline number of bags issued for the calendar year 2006 was found to be 13.4 billion.

At a meeting on 28 February 2008, WRAP reported that, based on the data supplied by retailers, interim results indicate a 14% reduction in the environmental impact of carrier bags as measured by the use of virgin plastic. The total number of bags used by the signatories reduced by 1 billion, from 13.4 billion in 2006 to 12.4 billion bags in 2007.

WRAP also reported at this meeting on the most popular retailer initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of carrier bags. These included the following: incentive card point schemes, carrier bag free check outs, promotion of re-useable bags, bags dispensed and bagged by cashier only, the introduction of in-store carrier bag recycling facilities (which have increased by 43%), reduced bag size, the introduction of bags with increased recycled content and charging for bags.

WRAP's position on options for reducing the environmental impact of carrier bags further (i.e. voluntary agreement, levy or ban)

WRAP is fully committed to the current voluntary agreement, and considers that it has the potential to significantly reduce the environmental impact of carrier bags. In addition, it avoids the unintended consequences that could follow from any legislative controls.

We recognise that this is an area of great public interest. On 10 March 2008, we issued a press release stating that, in our view, if a voluntary approach were not ultimately successful, then a tax or levy on throwaway bags could help play a significant role in changing consumer behaviour by giving a major incentive to re-use bags for shopping.

Research shows there is a strong consumer will to cut the environmental impact of free single-use bags, but that it is harder to get us all into the habit of re-use. The Government has signalled that it will take action to end the use of 'single use' plastic bags, possibly through a tax or levy. There is a drive to tackle the impact of free single-use carrier bags because they are a highly visible part of litter, they do not degrade quickly and they are an icon of our throwaway society.

However, we believe that if a tax or levy were introduced, it would need to be designed to minimise harmful side effects. It would need to tackle all carrier bags, and not just one material. And it would need to encourage the re-use of bags, for example through the take up of 'bags for life', to help shoppers reduce the financial impact of such a measure.

WRAP believe that the proceeds generated from any tax or levy ought to be used to fund schemes which encourage behaviour which benefits the environment. For example, this could include improved local recycling facilities for all materials, encouraging reductions in food waste, and making available a limited number of free 'bags for life' to consumers for a period before any charge were introduced.

Summary

WRAP is a national delivery body working on UK resource efficiency. We have been involved in the issue of packaging waste minimisation since 2004. We are also actively working with the major supermarkets to reduce the environmental impact of carrier bags.

Waste and Resources Action Plan

16 May 2008