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Are carbon labels on products of any help in changing consumers' buying decisions?

“Single number CO₂ labels make no sense” – this is a principal conclusion of a new study¹ carried out for ANEC by the Öko-Institut (Germany).

With climate change high up on the political and business agendas, product carbon footprinting (PCF) has become fashionable. Consequently, an increasing number of CO₂ or climate protection labels are being developed by retailers and producers for products such as foods.

The new ANEC study shows PCF information from different businesses is not always reliable and is difficult to compare due to existing methodological constraints² and lack of harmonised methodologies. PCF also presents a threat whereby the focus on greenhouse gas emissions may lead to other environmental impacts (for example, water consumption) being ignored, or even amplified.

Moreover, the ANEC study demonstrates that carbon labels on products are barely understood by consumers. Most labels available today give single numerical value indicating the product's CO₂ emissions level (e.g. 113g CO₂) without reference to any rating scales or indications of excellence. Hence no effective guidance is provided to consumers in their purchasing decisions nor are consumers able to identify the products with the lowest emissions. Furthermore, the labels are based on no more than industry self-assessment but can be perceived by consumers as independently-verified ecolabels.

Stephen Russell, ANEC Secretary-General, said “ANEC believes carbon footprinting to suffer from serious limitations and drawbacks which need to be addressed. We also believe carbon footprint labels for consumer products that rely exclusively on numerical values of CO₂ emissions to be pointless. Tools other than PCF may indeed be cheaper and more reliable in addressing the inclusion of climate protection in consumer information. Such tools could be measurable energy efficiency parameters or even messages such as “Eat less meat, eat local and seasonal”. PCF studies could nevertheless provide a starting point for the development of ecolabels associated with independent, third-party verification.”

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¹ ANEC study “Requirements on Consumer Information about Product Carbon Footprint”, available at: <http://www.anec.eu/attachments/ANEC-R&T-2010-ENV-001final.pdf>

² quite similar to those which exist in Life Cycle Assessment approaches

ANEC in brief

Raising standards for consumers

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, defending consumer interests in the processes of technical standardisation and conformity assessment as well as related legislation and public policies. ANEC was established in 1995 as an international non-profit association under Belgian law and represents consumer organisations from 31 European countries. ANEC is funded by the European Union and EFTA, with national consumer organisations contributing in kind. Its Secretariat is based in Brussels.

More information: www.anec.eu

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