

'Unearthing the role of potatoes in a healthy sustainable diet'



Summary report from an expert roundtable event

Wednesday 6 November 2013
Portcullis House, Westminster

Overview

A parliamentary roundtable event organised by Potato Council and chaired by Rt Hon Sir Jim Paice MP was held on Wednesday 6 November in Portcullis House, Westminster. Potato Council is a division of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board committed to supporting the potato industry in the UK.

The roundtable brought together a range of stakeholders including nutritionists, retailers, academics, MPs and peers to discuss new research by Cranfield University, *Are Potatoes a low-impact food compared with rice and pasta?*

The event facilitated a balanced discussion about the role of potatoes in a healthy sustainable diet and explored recommendations for Government, policy makers, retailers and industry. This report provides a summary of the issues discussed and recommendations made at the event.



Summary of presentations

Dr Tim Hess, Cranfield University

- New research by Cranfield University has found that, when expressed in terms of a typical portion size, potatoes and pasta can have lower GHGE and water impacts than basmati rice¹. The study also found a huge water requirement for growing rice compared to pasta or potatoes.

Maureen Strong, Co-Chair of Healthy and Sustainable Diet Working Group of the Green Food Project (Nutrition Manager, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board)

- The healthy and sustainable diet workstream of the Green Food Project recommended eight key principles of a healthy and sustainable diet. Key to these is the need to eat more plant-based foods including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day; currently our diets do not contain enough starchy carbohydrates.

Summary of recommendations

- Government and industry must find new ways to communicate the nutritional benefits of potatoes to health professionals
- Public Health England (PHE) should build on the success of the '5 a day' campaign and develop simple, clear campaigns targeting consumers to include potatoes
- The Government should initiate a peer review of the Green Food Project dietary guidelines
- Government and industry have a joint responsibility to promote potatoes as a healthy and sustainable food
- Food education programmes in the national curriculum should include teaching children where food comes from, how it is grown and how to prepare and cook fresh and healthy meals

Background to the roundtable

Following on from DEFRA's National Environment White Paper published in June 2011, the Green Food Project was set up with a view to finding ways to increase food production whilst improving the environment. After publishing initial conclusions in July 2012, the group reported further follow on work a year later. This highlighted that consumption levels of bread, rice, potatoes and pasta were below recommended levels, and called for a shared understanding of what 'good food' looks like both in terms of a healthy, sustainable diet and also broader sustainable food consumption².

The headline finding of the Cranfield University research is that rice typically has a larger GHGE and water footprint than potatoes or pasta¹. Given that the UK Government has set itself an ambitious target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% from the 1990 baseline by 2050, this research sheds new light on a key Government policy area.

Attendees

Rt Hon Sir Jim Paice MP	Roundtable Chair	Maureen Strong	Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board
Huw Irranca-Davies MP	Shadow Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Dan Crossley	Food Ethics Council
Baroness Parminter	Co-Chair of DEFRA/DECC Parliamentary Party Committee	Mike Scott	Manor Fresh
Mark Spencer MP	Member of Environmental Audit Select Committee	Peter Tinkler	Marks and Spencer
Roger Williams MP	Chair, Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Lee Abbey	NFU
Duncan Worth	QV Foods	Kathleen Kelliher	DEFRA
Professor Judy Buttriss	British Nutrition Foundation	Shruti Choudhary	Sustainable Restaurant Association
Dr Tim Hess	Cranfield University	David Walker	Fresh Potato Suppliers Association
		Dr Rob Clayton	Potato Council
		Caroline Evans	Potato Council
		Graham Nichols	Potato grower

² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Sustainable Consumption Report, follow up to the Green Food Project, 29 July 2013, accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-consumption-report-follow-up-to-the-green-food-project>

Presentations

Dr Tim Hess, Cranfield University

Tim Hess presented the headline findings of recent research commissioned by Potato Council titled, *Are Potatoes a low-impact food compared with rice and pasta?*¹, which compares the environmental burdens associated with the production of British potatoes, Indian basmati rice and Italian durum wheat pasta. The research determines the greenhouse gas emissions and the impact of water use at each stage of production for each starchy product from field to retail.

Focussing on the greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE) and water usage in the production of the three carbohydrates, the study found that, when expressed in terms of a typical portion size, potatoes and pasta have lower GHGE and water impacts than basmati rice.

The research highlighted that pasta has a much higher level of GHGE associated with its processing than potatoes, however these are cancelled out by the emissions associated with storage and transport of potatoes.

In conclusion, the study showed that, when expressed in terms of a typical portion size, potatoes and pasta have lower GHGE and water impacts than basmati rice.

Maureen Strong, Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board (Co-chair of the Healthy and Sustainable Diet Working Group of the Green Food Project)

Maureen Strong presented on the key findings of the Green Food Project's Consumption phase, which had developed recommendations around three key areas of sustainable consumption; principles of a healthy and sustainable diet; consumer behaviour; and sustainable consumption and growth. One of the eight key principles of a healthy and sustainable diet was to eat more plant-based foods, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

Consumption of starchy carbohydrates is below government guidance. The Eatwell plate recommends that starchy foods should make up a third of our diet, at present it is on average a fifth. Potatoes suffer from an image problem, as consumers do not understand the nutritional importance of eating starchy carbohydrates, and so do not consider potatoes to be important to their diet.

Potatoes (including chips) contribute 7% of total energy, 4% of saturated fatty acids, 15% vitamin B6, 14% vitamin C, 13% dietary fibre and 12% folate. Potatoes can increase the nutrient density of the diet by providing a relatively high micronutrient to energy content.

Potatoes are not only sustainable, they are also nutritious, and more must be done to communicate the health benefits to consumers and healthcare professionals, Maureen concluded.



Summary of discussion

Communicating the nutritional benefits of potatoes to health professionals

There was broad agreement from the group that PHE needs to do more to communicate the health benefits of fresh potatoes to healthcare professionals. This is partly due to the fact that policy makers tend to focus on the profile of traditional chips rather than fresh potatoes. Meanwhile significant product reformulation has resulted in healthier processed products, such as 5% fat in oven chips. Starchy foods such as potatoes also suffer from negative headlines in the media, who report dietary 'myths' like the idea that carbohydrates are 'bad'. One attendee commented that fresh potatoes are nutritious, but it is important to consider also how they cooked and what you add to them before serving.

A simple clear message to consumers

The group agreed that consumers need a simple message that addresses the low levels of starchy carbohydrate consumption. The '5 a day' campaign was cited as a good example of clear and simple messaging which communicates important dietary guidance in an effective way. There was agreement that retailers need to work together to convey a clear and consistent message and that consumers need to be 'inspired' and 'motivated' rather than 'educated'.

Several participants remarked on the low levels of public awareness regarding what constitutes nutritious food and how to cook it. It was agreed that consumers need to be taken on a journey in order to understand what 'sustainable' means, and consistently exposed to effective messaging by Government and NGOs around healthy and sustainable foods in order for consumption patterns to change. The role of celebrities such as sports teams in promoting public health messages was cited.

Government to take forward Green Food Project dietary guidelines

The group agreed that the conclusions of the healthy and sustainable working group of the Green Food Project, particularly the eight key principles of a healthy and sustainable diet, represent an encouraging step forward in promoting a healthy and sustainable diet. There were questions raised around next steps, with one attendee suggesting that the Government should look at this more closely and initiate a peer review.

Recommendation:

- PHE must find new and engaging ways of communicating the benefits of fresh potatoes to health professionals in order to de-bunk the myth that carbohydrates are bad for you.

Recommendations:

- Public Health England should work with local authorities, industry and the NHS to build on the simplicity of the '5 a day' campaign and create a new scheme to include potatoes which could be '5 a day plus potatoes'
- Retailers need to play a proactive role in developing clear consistent front of pack messaging on potato nutrition
- PHE should work with retailers and NGOs should devise new campaigns around cooking and storing potatoes to educate consumers and make the raw product more attractive

Recommendations:

- The Government should commission a peer review of the Green Food Project principles of a healthy and sustainable diet
- There should be a review of public procurement guidelines which should be benchmarked against the principles of a healthy and sustainable diet set out in the Green Food Project

The ways that potatoes can deliver health and sustainability benefits should be better communicated to key audiences

The group expressed concerns that, as a food which has health and environmental sustainability benefits, consumption levels of potatoes are in decline. There was some debate around the reasons for the decline, with factors cited including the globalisation of our diets and consequent rise in popularity of pasta and rice, as well as shopping and cooking habits. There were also comments about the complexity and dangers of describing saying a food as 'sustainable'.

The issue of potato pricing in the context of global food trends was raised, with prices being subject to volatility. It was noted that the United Nations named 2008 the international year of the potato to focus world attention on the role that the potato can play in providing food security, offering a nutritious food for those in poverty.

Building information about cooking potatoes into the school food plan

The importance of school programmes to educate children about where food comes from and what constitutes healthy and sustainable eating was discussed. The recently published School Food Plan has helped put cooking and food education back on the national curriculum, and schemes like Potato Council's Grow Your Own Potatoes and Cook Your Own Potatoes are successfully educating children about where food comes from and how potatoes fit into a balanced diet.

Recommendations:

- PHE and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs need to develop consistent positive messaging around how potatoes can deliver health and sustainability benefits
- Industry needs to help develop the right language to target consumers through dedicated working groups

Recommendations:

- Food education programmes in the national curriculum should include teaching children where food comes from, how it grows and how to prepare and cook fresh and healthy meals
- Industry and Government should develop a toolkit for teachers that equips them with the resources needed to teach children about healthy sustainable diets



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