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Japan to launch carbon footprint labelling scheme

- Government approved labels will appear on food and drink
- Major companies sign up voluntarily

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Beer on tap in Japan ... Sapporo, a brewer, has said it will label cans of beer with an individual carbon footprint. Photograph: Jonathan Watts

Japan is to carry carbon footprint labels on food packaging and other products in an ambitious scheme to persuade companies and consumers to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

The labels, to appear on dozens of items including food and drink, detergents and electrical appliances from next spring, will go further than similar labels already in use elsewhere.

They will provide detailed breakdowns of each product's carbon footprint under a government-approved calculation and labeling system now being discussed by the trade ministry and around 30 firms.

The labels will show how much carbon dioxide is emitted during the manufacture, distribution and disposal of each product, the ministry said.

The Japanese campaign is loosely modeled on a British pilot scheme involving Tesco and several other firms, though that scheme has yet to gain official approval.

Furthermore, the trade ministry's Takuma Inamura told the Guardian: "We believe our labeling will be even more detailed, to allow consumers to make the best possible choice."

Officials decided to draw up a uniform method of labeling carbon emissions to allay fears among some firms that their competitors may use in-house calculations to produce the lowest possible emissions data.

"Unless all of the companies use the same method, there's little point to the exercise," Inamura said.

To promote the scheme, the ministry has released details of the carbon footprint left by a packet of crisps. A single bag emits 75 grams of carbon dioxide, 44% of which comes from growing potatoes, with another 30% emitted during the production stage. The

packaging accounts for a further 15%, while the delivery and disposal of the bag account for 9% and 2%, respectively.

About 30 companies will display their labeled items at an eco-products fair in Tokyo in December, and the first batches are expected to appear in shops at the beginning of April 2009.

Sapporo, a leading Japanese brewery, has already said it will carry the labels on cans of its popular Black Label beer. Shoppers will be told how much CO₂ is emitted by the machinery used to plant barley and hops, during production and transportation, and when the empty can is recycled.

Although the labeling scheme is voluntary, few firms want to be seen to be lagging behind rivals in the rush to corner the growing market in eco-friendly products. The supermarket firm Aeon, as well as the convenience store chains Lawson and Seven-Eleven and the electronics maker Matsushita are among the firms taking part.

As host of the groundbreaking Kyoto conference on greenhouse gas emissions in 1997, Japan is under mounting pressure to use its technological prowess and educated consumer base to promote a low-carbon society. But it has so far struggled to reach its Kyoto protocol commitment to slash CO₂ emissions by 6% below 1990 levels by 2012.

In July, the government vowed to reduce total carbon emissions by up to 80% by 2050 with the prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda, calling on consumers to lead a global "CO₂ reduction revolution".

Under Fukuda's Cool Earth Initiative, Japan believes it can lower emissions from current levels by 14% by 2020, although UN scientists say cuts as high as 40% will be needed to avoid environmental catastrophe.

Later this year Japanese firms will experiment with a carbon trading system modeled on the one used by the European Union. The government plans to put carbon-capture technology - the storage of CO₂ emitted by power plants and factories - in place by 2020.

But it remains to be seen whether consumers can be persuaded to consider a product's carbon footprint as well as its price tag. In a recent survey almost 80% of shoppers said they would be willing to spend no more than an extra 2,000 yen (£10) a month on energy-saving vehicles and other eco-friendly products.

"Most people don't know what the term carbon footprint really means," Inamura said. "But we hope this will be a launch pad for other companies to take part and increase public awareness."

· This article was amended on Thursday August 21 2008. We referred to Japan struggling to reach its Kyoto protocol commitment by 1012 - of course we meant 2012. This has been corrected.

