

UK supermarkets on track for greater bag reduction

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A new target has been agreed between major UK supermarket chains and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in the continuing drive to cut the number of free plastic shopping bags.

The government agreement with the British Retail Consortium (BRC), representing seven supermarket groups, aims to reduce the volume of carrier bags provided to customers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by 50% against 2006 levels.

Environment minister Jane Kennedy welcomed the bold commitment and said the government will work closely with the BRC on a campaign to help consumers reduce their bag use. Supermarkets have already taken some imaginative steps to help us use fewer carrier bags and other high street retailers should look to them for inspiration, she said.

Tesco, one of the seven groups, said in a statement that schemes it has initiated such as awarding points on the reward cards of customers who reused bags had been paying off.

We were the first retailer to set our own reduction targets on carrier bags more than two years ago and since that time we have saved more than 3 billion bags, said Tesco's corporate and legal affairs director, Lucy Neville-Rolfe.

The BRC heralded the efforts already made by supermarkets under an existing commitment to reduce the environmental impact of bags by 25% during 2008.

Stephen Robertson, BRC director general, said: Supermarkets have been so successful in [reducing bag uptake] by taking customers with them in ways they find acceptable, by encouraging and rewarding.

David Tyson, chief executive of the Packaging and Films Association (Pafa), also commended supermarkets for the success of their voluntary agreements, which the trade body has supported in preference to legislation or taxes.

Pafa is planning to help Defra with analysis of the effects that changes in bag usage are having on the environment, for example if use of heavier bags has a worse environmental effect.

Tyson told PRW he is keen that the focus of efforts should not be just on numbers of bags reduced, but takes account of overall environmental impacts. But he is encouraged that the amount of political spin around the issue of bags shown over the past year now seems to have receded.

I sense there is a bit more willingness to listen to the scientific arguments again, he said.