

Title Could 'food miles' become a non-tariff barrier?

Author Julian A. Heyes and Andrew Smith

Citation Abstracts of 27th International Horticultural Congress & Exhibition (IHC 2006), August 13-19, 2006, COEX (Convention & Exhibition), Seoul, Korea. 494 pages.

Keywords food miles; non-tariff barrier

Abstract

Movements advocating 'buy local' have used the 'food miles' concept to develop consumer awareness of the environmental 'footprint' of food items freighted over longer distances, and have raised objections to the environmental costs of pandering to consumer demand for year-round availability of a wide variety of horticultural products. This problem requires careful analysis, particularly because the 'food miles' concept may help to create a new type of non-tariff trade barrier. The environmental benefit of the 'food miles' concept is not so clear-cut. Transport by sea has been estimated to impose a 20-fold lower energy cost per kg of produce than transport by road, making a simple comparison of kilometers traveled almost meaningless. Air freight, often criticised as the least sustainable form of transport, has a hugely variable environmental cost per kg depending on whether perishable produce is transported in freight-only aeroplanes or as cargo in passenger flights. A focus on the environmental impact of 'food miles' is misleading unless there is additional information on the environmental costs involved in producing alternative products. The 'food miles' concept comes at a particularly bad time for developing countries, for whom niche marketing of horticultural products can make a significant contribution to sustainable socio-economic development. The initiative 'Linking Farmers with Markets' proposed by 'Post-harvest Action' was adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in 2003 as a means to support sustainable development in developing countries. This paper will explore some of the issues surrounding 'food miles' calculations, economic development.