

British supermarkets create estimated 800,000 tonnes of plastic waste each year

Guardian investigation reveals lengths big retailers go to to keep figures secret

Sandra Laville and Matthew Taylor

Britain's leading supermarkets create more than 800,000 tonnes of plastic packaging waste every year, according to an investigation by the Guardian that reveals how the chains keep details of their plastic footprint secret. As concern grows over the scale of unnecessary plastic waste, the Guardian asked eight supermarkets how much plastic packaging they sell to consumers and whether they would commit to a plastic-free aisle. The retailers have to declare the amount of plastic they put on the market annually under an EU directive, but

this is kept secret. Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Waitrose, Asda and Lidl all refused to disclose their figures when asked, with most saying the data was "commercially sensitive".

None committed to setting up plastic-free aisles, which the prime minister called for last week. Only Aldi and the Co-operative were open about the amount of plastic packaging they put on the market.

Using their data and other publicly available market share information, the environmental consultancy Eunomia estimated that leading supermarkets are creating more than 800,000 tonnes of plastic waste a year, more than half of annual UK household plastic waste of 1.5m tonnes.

The amount would cover the whole of Greater London to a depth of 2.5cm. The total relates to food and beverage products. It is an estimate based on analysing the combined packaging and

In figures

1.5m

British households' annual amount of plastic packaging waste in tonnes

5.30%

The percentage of its total plastic packaging that Aldi recycled in 2016

£18

Amount per tonne UK supermarkets and retailers pay towards recycling

market share of the supermarkets that provided figures, and grossing up on the basis of the total market share of the leading supermarkets.

Dominic Hogg, the Eunomia chairman, said: "Data reported for plastic packaging put on the market as a whole is an underestimate, in our view."

Supermarkets in Britain keep their plastic footprint secret through a confidentiality agreement signed with agencies involved in the British recycling compliance scheme.

It means the amount of plastic packaging created by each supermarket and the money it pays towards recycling is kept out of the public domain.

Iain Ferguson, the environment manager at the Co-op, said Britain should adopt the French system of bonus-malus, where supermarkets are taxed more for using material that is not easily recyclable and taxed less for sustainable and recyclable packaging. "We need this to be much more transparent," he said. "There should be a fiscal system that rewards good recyclability and penalises poor recyclability. We should be able to replicate it in some way in the UK."

"I don't know why other supermarkets are not revealing their figures." Co-op, the UK's sixth-biggest supermarket, cut its amount of plastic packaging by 44% from 78,492 tonnes in 2006 to 43,495 in 2016.

Ferguson said the supermarket had introduced changes that others

\$180bn investment in plastic factories feeds global packaging binge

Continued funding in manufacturing plants by fossil fuel companies will increase plastic production by 60%, raising permanent pollution of the earth.



Plastic fibres found in tap water around the world, study reveals

Excessive use of plastic globally is disturbing water contamination by plastic particles, with 85% of samples found to be polluted.

How the Guardian covered the issue

followed, including removing plastic lining from tissue boxes, ditching polystyrene bases from pizzas and changing tomato punnets from plastic to cardboard.

Aldi's amount of plastic packaging increased from 37,261 tonnes in 2013 to 64,000 in 2016. The store recycled 3,400 tonnes of plastic in 2016, just over 5% of the total.

A spokeswoman for Aldi said the increase in its plastic footprint coincided with a rapid expansion in the UK, from 516 to 700 stores.

Iceland said it would eliminate plastic packaging on own-brand products within five years.

The former Asda chief executive Andy Clarke recently said supermarkets should not use any plastics for packaging. "It is vital that the UK packaging industry and supermarkets work together to turn off the tap," he said. Supermarkets in Britain pay less

towards collecting and recycling their plastic waste than their counterparts in any other European country, leaving taxpayers to pick up 90% of the bill in a system shrouded in secrecy.

On average, supermarkets and retailers pay £18 a tonne towards recycling, compared with up to £133 for businesses in other European countries, according to figures provided to the Environmental Audit Committee. In Germany, producers pay 100%.

The UK system, known as the producer responsibility scheme, was heavily criticised by MPs this month.

Louise Edge, a senior oceans campaigner at Greenpeace UK, said saving oceans from plastic contamination required cooperation from businesses.

"Reform of producer responsibility laws are key to that ... Under the current system, just 10% of the cost of packaging waste disposal is paid by business, with taxpayers left to pick up the rest of the bill," she said.

Supermarkets declare the amount of plastic packaging they use to Valpak, one of 28 commercial compliance companies, from which the amount they need to contribute towards recycling is calculated.

Adrian Hawkes, the policy director of Valpak, which is used by most major supermarkets, said: "We have confidentiality terms in our membership conditions, so that we are assuring our members that we are not going to disclose their information to anyone else.

"Their information about the amount of packaging they produce is sensitive information relating to their sales volumes."

The Environment Agency, which acts as the government regulator of the system, also adheres to the confidentiality agreement.

A spokeswoman said it could not disclose figures of how much plastic packaging individual supermarkets were responsible for, as a result.

The only publicly available information is aggregated data for all packaging materials on the national packaging waste database (NPWD).

Hogg said: "The status quo is one of producer irresponsibility - packaging that's unnecessarily wasteful, some that has no hope of being recycled, and too much being littered on land and sea.

"Producers and retailers comply with their recycling obligations at minimal cost to themselves. If we had a system where producers were charged fees that were modulated to reflect their environmental impact, and where the fees covered the full costs of managing packaging, we would influence the design of packaging and could specify high-quality recycling infrastructure."

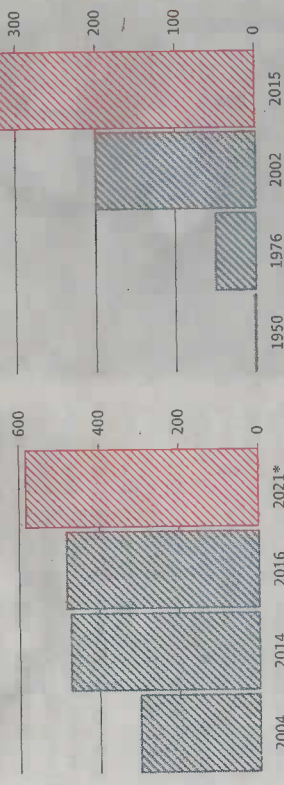
The six supermarkets that refused to provide figures on how much plastic packaging they put on the market annually referred the Guardian to the British Retail Consortium.

The BRC said general packaging information was available on the NPWD.

A spokesperson said: "Retailers are continually innovating in relation to packaging and recyclability. Several BRC members have ambitious internal targets around recyclable packaging, and retailers, investing with their suppliers, are pioneering a number of initiatives that could make a significant difference to the recyclability of packaging and use of recycled material, if workable and adopted at scale."

Throwaway society

Worldwide, we produce almost 20,000 plastic bottles every second
Plastic bottles, billions



Sources: Euromonitor, Statista, PlasticEurope *Forecast

Why is plastic being demonised?

Since the 1950s, 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic has been produced. Plastic is seen as a versatile, indispensable product, but the environmental impact is becoming more stark. Plastic is now so pervasive that recycling systems cannot keep up and the leakage into the environment is such that by 2050 plastic in the ocean will outweigh fish. Last year scientists found plastic fibres in tap water, and plastic has been found in the stomachs of sea creatures in the deepest part of the ocean. Most plastic waste ends up in landfill sites or leaks into the natural environment, where it is causing huge damage to eco-systems on land and sea, creating near permanent contamination. According to academics in the United States, by 2015, of all the plastic waste generated since the 1950s, only 9% has been recycled, with 12% incinerated and 79% accumulated in landfill sites or the environment.

Why are the supermarkets under fire?

Producers of plastic include retailers, drinks companies and supermarkets. The Guardian reveals today that supermarkets create more than half of the plastic waste in the household stream in the UK. But they refuse to reveal how much they put on to the streets and how much they pay towards recycling it. Supermarkets are under pressure to reduce their plastic packaging and campaigners argue they have the power to turn off the tap. Much of the packaging they sell to consumers is not recyclable: plastic film, black plastic trays, sleeves on drinks bottles and some coloured plastic. The Recycling Association and other experts believe supermarkets could do much more to make packaging 100% recyclable and reduce the use of plastic.

Who pays to clean up the waste?

The taxpayer, overwhelmingly. Producers and retailers pay the lowest towards recycling and dealing with their waste in Europe. In other countries, the "polluter" is forced to pay much more. In France, a sliding system of charges means those who put more non-recyclable material on the market pay more.

What can shoppers do to help?

Supermarkets are under pressure, not least from the prime minister, to create plastic-free aisles. A growing number of zero-waste shops are springing up and consumers are being encouraged to ask for products to be sold without plastic.

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