

# **Memorandum to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Enquiry into Waste Reduction**

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## **Product life-span information**

1. Access to product information is one of many influences upon purchasing decisions. Three-quarters of consumers consider information about product life-spans to be 'very important' according to a survey undertaken in 2000. The same survey found that more than half of all consumers were 'dissatisfied' with the current level of information.
2. Empirical evidence to suggest that consumers would utilise product life-span information may be unavailable, but it is generally accepted that increased information improves market place efficiency. It could even be argued that consumers have a right to know the planned design life of products in order to enable them to identify products according to their intrinsic quality as distinct from other factors that may be considered to add value. Increased knowledge may encourage more consumers to choose products that last longer, thereby reducing waste from discarded items. Clearer expectations about life-spans may also deter people from discarding products prematurely.
3. Consumers are likely to respond positively to the provision of product-life information if (a) it enables them to compare products and identify which ones offer the best value for money (i.e. on the basis of cost per year of anticipated service life) or (b) they have been convinced of a need to take greater account of product life-spans in their purchasing behaviour in order to reduce the environmental impacts of consumption.
4. Product life-span information may be obtained in many various ways and takes different forms, including life-span labels, point of sale leaflets, verbal advice from retail assistants, manufacturers' or retailers' brochures, product reviews or personal blogs on Internet sites, specialist consumer magazines, word of mouth and environmental labels such as the EU Eco-label. Consumers may also use proxies and cues, such as the length of guarantee, the look or 'feel' of a product, a BSI or ISO number, brand reputation or price.
5. If the Government accepts the case for increased product life-span information it will need to consider a range of options, the effectiveness of which may vary by product type. The introduction of a life-span label could be on either a statutory or voluntary basis. The options also include the introduction of a life-span label or the incorporation of life-span criteria into other environmental labelling schemes.
6. The approach taken by Lord Beaumont in his proposed amendment to the Sale and Supply of Goods Bill in 1994 was to give authority to the Secretary of State, after due consultation with interested parties, to require sellers "to supply to prospective buyers information stating the normal expected life span of the goods under reasonable conditions for use" for any stated class of goods.
7. A voluntary approach might involve the Government in multi-stakeholder debate within key industry sectors to promote the use of life-span labelling, encourage longer guarantees to signify increased durability, and develop industry standards and codes of conduct on life-span labels and the availability and fair pricing of spare parts. Such an approach was adopted last year in Scotland's Household Waste Prevention Action Plan.

8. Certain technical issues with legal and financial implications need to be resolved. Should product life-spans be measured in periods of time or cycles of use? Would life-span labels make manufacturers liable to pay all costs relating to disrepair during the period in question or should allowances be made for normal wear and tear?
9. The Government could promote the communication of life-span information by measures other than labels, such as
  - date stamping products at the point of manufacture
  - integrating devices on products that monitor cycles of use / intensity of use and are visible to consumers
  - the use of longer guarantees to signify enhanced durability
  - the supply of relevant information from manufacturers to retailers and its communication to consumers through point of sale information and better trained retail staff
  - education and information campaigns about careful product use and disposal.
10. The Government should integrate consumption, product durability and waste reduction more effectively in its sustainable development strategy. Initiatives are needed to encourage consumers to purchase higher quality, durable products and to undertake repairs. Since an amendment in 1994 'durability' has been among the criteria determining 'satisfactory quality' under the 1979 Sale of Goods Act (section 14[2B]), but this is proving of little consequence in the absence of adequate life-span information.

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