



Tomatoes: Buying Local Helps Reduce Pollution And Protect Your Health

The transportation-related pollution from flying tomatoes from the Netherlands includes 500 times more global warming impact and 2 times more particulate matter pollution than transporting tomatoes grown in California.

For more information, please contact **Diane Bailey** or **Miriam Rotkin-Ellman** at (415) 875-6100.



What are the hidden costs of the food you eat? The distance your food travels from the field to your plate (known as food miles) can substantially add to global warming *and* can increase many health risks such as asthma, cancer, and premature deaths. Let's look at tomatoes, which can be trucked in from Mexico, or even flown in by airplane from the Netherlands.

Why does it matter how far your tomatoes have traveled?

How your food is grown, stored, transported, processed and cooked can all influence how it impacts climate change and the environment. Transportation-related impacts are particularly important for imported foods, like tomatoes. The United States is a major producer of tomatoes, but is also a major importer. Most tomatoes come into the United States from Mexico by truck. However, millions of pounds of hothouse tomatoes are also flown by airplane to the United States from the Netherlands. Americans eat an average of 19 pounds of tomatoes each year, almost a third of which are imported. In California alone, more than 180 million and 1.6 million pounds of tomatoes are imported per year from Mexico and the Netherlands respectively.

From Mexico the tomatoes make a 1,200-mile journey in trucks to the Otay Mesa border crossing near San Diego, while those from the Netherlands make a 6,000 mile journey

by airplane to the Los Angeles airport. From these entry points they then make their way to supermarkets across the state and beyond. This long journey has major costs both to the environment and to people's health.

Locally grown versus imported tomatoes in California

The transportation associated with importing tomatoes from Mexico and the Netherlands into California causes the release of about 28 million pounds (14,000 tons) of global warming pollution (15 million and 13 million pounds from Mexico and the Netherlands respectively) annually—the equivalent amount of carbon dioxide emitted from 2,400 vehicles. Another 16,800 pounds (8.4 tons) of soot and smog-forming pollutants (16,400 and 400 pounds from Mexico and the Netherlands respectively) are released into the air—the amount of pollution from 2,000 vehicles. Transporting tomatoes by air results in far more global warming emissions than transport by truck.

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In 2005, the transport of tomatoes from Mexico and the Netherlands to California by truck and airplane resulted in the release of an estimated 28 million pounds of pollutants that contributed to global warming and caused unhealthy air quality in California.

Five things you can do to help reduce your food miles

Choosing to buy local food can reduce global warming pollution, improve air quality, and protect your health. Here are five steps you can take as an individual to protect your environment and your health—without sacrificing the taste and quality of your food:

1. Buy locally grown tomatoes and avoid tomatoes flown in by airplane. Tomatoes are grown outdoors in California from April through November. At other times, look for hothouse tomatoes grown in California or avoid buying tomatoes until they are in season.
2. Buy produce from your local farmers' market. You might also be able to sign up for deliveries of food baskets from local farms, so check for community supported agriculture (CSA) programs in your area. For more information on buying local visit <http://guide.buylocalca.org/> or www.localharvest.org.

3. Ask the grocery stores, restaurants, and work cafeterias that you frequent to carry local foods and include country of origin on food labels. You can find a sample letter to send to them at www.nrdc.org/foodmiles.

4. Encourage businesses and government bodies in your area to create farmers' markets and to adopt procurement policies that favor locally grown, organic, and sustainably harvested foods.

5. Tell the USDA to implement the provision of the 2002 Farm Bill requiring food labels on produce items to include the country of origin. You can find a sample letter to send them at www.nrdc.org/foodmiles.

The Environmental and Health Price Tag in California (Importing from Mexico)

- 15 million pounds of carbon dioxide (CO₂)
- 16,000 pounds of nitrogen oxides (NO_x)
- 400 pounds of particulate matter (PM₁₀)

The Environmental and Health Price Tag in California (Importing from the Netherlands)

- 13 million pounds of carbon dioxide (CO₂)
- 400 pounds of smog forming nitrogen oxides (NO_x)
- 10 pounds of particulate matter (PM₁₀)

