

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Sustainable food could be at heart of economic recovery and nation’s health, says SAC Consulting**

The Covid-19 pandemic could accelerate sustainable food trends, according to SAC Consulting, part of Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC). Recent reports show that food transparency, local sourcing and ‘immunity’ eating are key drivers for consumer purchasing decisions, which provides opportunity for both wider industry and food and drink producers to help rebuild the economy on green credentials, says Alistair Trail of SAC Consulting’s Food & Drink team.

“Given the sweeping change and extraordinary circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be easy for consumers to cast aside concerns for the environment and sustainability, but the pandemic has in fact highlighted the value of sustainable food systems, our natural economy and of green technologies. We are seeing rising consumer interest in buying healthy, nutritious food produced with minimal impact on the environment,” said Alistair. “There is an opportunity here to channel the significant resources needed to get the economy back on track in a way that is consistent with the transition to a more sustainable future.”

A recent interview with the Head of Sustainability at Kerry Group, Juan Aguiriano outlined that the main consumer trends developing post Covid-19 are food safety, trust and transparency. Three quarters of consumers want to know more about the safety of their food and 51% of consumers want to understand more about what is in their food. Nearly half (48%) of consumers are ready to pay more for local foods and those brands that emphasise provenance and local supply chains.

Environmental sustainability remains important especially around climate, energy and carbon. In March, analysis and research company GlobalData reported that 45% of consumers actively buy products that are better for the environment. This is a trend accelerated by Covid-19 according to Juan Aguiriano, who said that 50% of consumers, which is a new record high, are looking to consume more responsibly when it comes to the food on their plate. Plant protein, for example, is not only eaten because of the health benefits but because consumers perceive that this has a positive impact on the environment.

“These are longstanding trends that are now being accelerated by Covid-19,” said Alistair. “The implications for food producers and manufacturers are investing in clear labelling as well as reformulating with natural ingredients, locally sourced where possible, rather than using artificial ingredients and chemicals - which could and should in turn support Scotland’s rural economy.”

Larger brands are using this extra consumer understanding to market their products using Life Cycle Analysis - which calculates the environmental impact of a product during its use - and comparing products against high energy and high water usage alternatives.

A new trend established since the Covid-19 outbreak is the rise of the ‘immunity consumer’ who is looking for food that offers benefits to their immune system. Previously consumers may have looked at vitamin tablets, pills, nutritional bars or health shots but now it is incorporated in food products that are far more mainstream.

“One-third of UK consumers are proactively looking for ingredients that can help their immunity including traditional unfashionable ingredients eaten a modern way. We have worked with companies creating drinks from the very nutritious coastal plant, sea buckthorn, or introducing vitamin-packed seaweed into savoury biscuits.”

The key challenge for the industry is to balance this rising interest with affordability and cost.

“The Covid-19 emergency is causing an economic crisis, so it is important that these products are no longer niche and are affordable to the general population. Manufacturers can make great-tasting healthy food economical by taking a different distribution model than the one traditionally used by the health food market,” said Alistair.

There is equally an opportunity for the Government to re-set how disadvantaged people are supported in their local communities with access to nutritious, sustainably-produced food.

“As job losses increase and food banks report rising demand, we’ve seen an admirable surge in effort from the agriculture sector, food and drink businesses, voluntary organisations and communities to prevent hunger - but these groups need more support.

“With several charities facing cash shortfalls there is a huge opportunity to reduce the bureaucratic barriers that prevent them from accessing surplus food. Investing in community organisations and food cooperatives will be crucial to people’s health and wellbeing and sustainability in general as we recover from this crisis.“

There is also, added Alistair, scope for the public sector’s procurement to more fully support local producers and rebuild the nation’s health and wealth, with schools, hospitals and public buildings serving nutritious meals based on local, seasonal and sustainable raw ingredients.

“This kind of joined-up approach should lay the foundations for a fundamental rethink of our food system. If we are to build a truly sustainable food future, the best evidence shows we must shift to a more sustainable and circular economy.”