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## Matthew Newman: Consumers need carbon content labels

**By Matthew Newman - Special To The Bee**

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This holiday season, Californians will spend billions on gifts from far-flung parts of the world. Recent scares about high levels of toxic chemicals in children's toys will lead many to research the safety and origins of the products they buy. But something important will be missing for consumers truly looking to make a sound shopping decision: the carbon content of the products they buy.

The phrase "carbon content" refers to the amount of carbon dioxide released during a product's production and distribution. For the majority of products, there is simply no way for consumers to know which is the best choice from a global warming standpoint.

Would that toy made in China seem as inexpensive if you knew the locally produced one next to it on the shelf required for production half as much energy?

Today, it's impossible for us to let our wallets do the talking on environmental priorities.

Using our wallets is a revolutionary way to think about reducing carbon emissions. We usually think of global warming as a problem for power plants or car producers. Yet, at the end of the day, all of the electricity, diesel and jet fuel used to produce and transport products are used for us, the consumer. We can take control of our own impact on global warming – and influence producers in China, India or anywhere else in the world – without having to rely solely on diplomacy, a carbon tax or any other regulatory scheme.

What we need is a system that helps us choose between two comparable products on the basis of their carbon content. What we need is a carbon label for consumer and food products in California. Such a label would be similar to existing labels on food products, such as the nutrition or certified organic labels.

The food labeling policies have changed the way we think about food. Americans are eating more organic food and less trans fat – and because of a small label on the back of every package.

Similarly, with a carbon label, we could see the amount of carbon emissions generated to provide us with everything from food to furniture. A label on the back of your bottle of water would tell you how much greenhouse gas was emitted in extracting the water from the ground, lighting and heating the production facility, producing the plastic bottle and transporting the finished product to your corner store.

Would the extra carbon released for the clean, fresh taste of European spring water be worth it? Well, that would be your choice. But, at least you would know you were making an informed decision.

To be successful, a carbon labeling standard would need to minimize the impact on business. More consumer information should not and need not impose significant costs on businesses. Such a labeling standard has the potential to significantly boost the prospects of California-based businesses. They have a built-in carbon content advantage, owing to shorter shipping distances compared with products produced in other states or countries.

The idea of measuring the carbon footprint of products through a carbon label has recently been gaining traction. The U.K.'s Carbon Trust has worked with several companies to produce a label detailing the carbon footprint of products. Tesco, a British grocery chain with plans to open stores in Southern California and the Southwest, hopes to have a much more wide-ranging effect on product "footprinting" by labeling all of the products – food, clothing and household goods – in its stores.

Here in California researchers and advocates are also looking into the idea of a carbon label for consumer products.

California's policymakers must look for innovative approaches to meeting and exceeding the goals set out in the state's landmark global warming legislation, Assembly Bill 32. A carbon label for consumer products would be a big step toward achieving those goals.

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