

PAS 2050: A means to an end rather than an end in itself

PAS 2050, the BSI's Specification for the assessment of the life cycle greenhouse gas emissions of goods and services, has finally been officially published. Its objective is to provide a common framework for businesses to calculate the carbon footprint of their products. The list of companies who have been involved in the testing of the methodology is impressive: Tesco, Boots, Innocent Smoothies, to name but a few.

PAS 2050 makes some real progress in a difficult field. It sets some key ground rules for calculating carbon footprints, such as where the boundaries should be drawn, how much supply chain specific data is required, how to handle biogenic CO₂ and carbon storage, and how to deal with recycling processes that may give rise to "avoided emissions" by replacing the need for virgin materials.

Some may argue that PAS 2050 is unnecessary, as a carbon footprint is essentially a subset of a life cycle analysis (LCA). International standards for LCA have been in existence for more than 10 years, so why develop a carbon footprint standard? The truth is, although the LCA standards ensure the integrity and transparency of a study they are all encompassing and cater for the full variety of applications for which LCA can be applied. As such, the LCA standards are non-prescriptive, allowing the LCA practitioner to make decisions that fit with the goal and scope of a project so long as these are justifiable and clear. The end result is a complex and detailed report, tempered by caveats and uncertainties.

In contrast, if it is to be an effective tool for improving our understanding of the carbon impact of products and services, carbon footprinting has to be a sharper, more accessible and consistent tool. We must be sure, at a glance, that we are comparing like with like. For this reason, the tighter rules of PAS 2050 are needed.

Nonetheless, no modeling exercise is perfect. The authors of PAS 2050 have found it particularly difficult to draw up clear and fair rules on how to handle the potential credits arising from recycling. This has been particularly contentious in the packaging industry, as different packaging materials have different recycling strategies, reflecting fundamental differences in the nature of the materials.

Initial drafts of PAS 2050 made no allowance for crediting post-consumer recycling, with any benefit going to the secondary material using the recycle rather than to the primary product that provides the material. This is okay in a closed loop recycling system, but creates difficulties and disadvantages for an open loop system such as steel or aluminium. PAS 2050 has now softened its stance on this a little, although this has in itself created its own difficulties. For example, during a carbon footprinting session at the recent CEPI Paper Week it was observed that LCA experts could interpret the PAS 2050 recycling rules as applied to paper in ten different ways.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that PAS 2050 is not an important first step on the road to a more formalized and consistent carbon footprinting approach. Carbon footprinting is a modeling exercise, and therefore by default it will never be perfect. This is not an excuse for businesses to postpone the important task of quantifying and managing their carbon footprint. Sometime it may

be necessary to divert from the PAS 2050 methodology. So long as this is done to improve the analysis (rather than present the product or service in the best possible light) then this should be acceptable. It is easy to get hung up on methodologies, but it should also be remembered that carbon footprinting is a means to an end, and the end point should be reducing the carbon intensity of products and services rather than producing a perfect, PAS 2050 compliant assessment.

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