

# Karma Co-operative Product Policy

## October 2002

Members of Karma Co-operative wish to purchase good products at fair prices, while supporting suppliers whose presence and practices benefit the community. We believe that decisions about food are not only matters of cost, taste, and nutrition: food production and distribution also have major impacts on the environment, on social, political and economic systems, on labour, and on animal welfare. While we would like to make positive choices in all of these areas with every product that we stock and buy, we recognize the need to feed ourselves in an imperfect world.

While all members of the community are welcome to join us, we recognize that a store owned and controlled by its members will be of special interest to people who are politically active on issues such as poverty and social justice, who have special dietary needs, who wish to reduce their negative impact on the environment through practices such as vegetarianism, or who wish to save money through an active participation in the co-operative. Our shared core values about how food and other products should be produced, distributed, and marketed reflect these core communities of our membership.

This policy expresses those enduring values and outlines a general framework for putting them into practice. Complementing this policy is an Implementation Guide, in which the Board of Directors and the Managers have developed specific procedures and practices to ensure that the intent of the policy is implemented, especially as circumstances may change in the years after this policy was first adopted. Its guidelines describe how we conduct research, decide whether products meet our standards, and communicate the results to the larger membership. As circumstances change, the Board and the Managers may include additional considerations, not yet incorporated into this policy, into the Guide. However, any such changes will not become part of this policy, the members' formal statement about product choice, until approved by the members at a General Meeting.

There are three major sections to this policy. We begin by stating **Our core values**, identifying practices or institutions along this continuum: "strongly support" → "support" → "oppose" → "strongly oppose" → "condemn". Next, in **Our selection and marketing of products**, we discuss how we evaluate products based on our core values and what range of action we can take concerning those products. Finally, in **Our commitment to action**, we outline important steps that complement the day-to-day decisions about specific products.

## Our core values

### Political and economic considerations:

Our decisions to buy products are also decisions to support those who produce and distribute them, to ensure their continuing presence in our communities. Large, remote corporations can too easily lose the ability to balance business and community concerns; foreign businesses, however well-intentioned, will not reinvest their profits in our own communities. Our own co-operative also must achieve such a balance, remaining both financially healthy and true to its principles. Accordingly,

- We strongly support local, regional, and Canadian producers.
- We strongly support small, co-operative, and community businesses, rather than large, multinational corporations or their subsidiaries.
- We strongly support stocking products that are affordable by members with limited income, while not rejecting products that, while affordable by only some members, contribute to the store's economic well-being.

### Environmental considerations:

Our decisions to buy products are also decisions to support physical systems of production and distribution, with consequences that can be destructive, benign, or beneficial to the natural environment. Organic production addresses these issues for the farmers, the primary producers, but similar issues

arise at the stages of processing, packaging, and distribution, where there are fewer clearly accepted standards of conduct. Accordingly,

- We strongly support the principles of organic agriculture, especially from farms certified as such, but also from farms in transition or from those avoiding pesticides without seeking certification.
- We support environmentally and personally safe alternatives to the dangerous chemicals sometimes used for personal hygiene, household cleaning, and pest control.
- We oppose wasteful packaging, especially when there is no effective way to biodegrade or recycle what cannot be reused.
- We oppose the transportation of products from distant sources when locally-produced alternatives are available.
- We strongly oppose the use of irradiation in food preservation.
- We condemn the genetic modification of plants and animals.

### **Ethical considerations:**

Our decisions to buy products are also decisions to support relationships with the human and animal inhabitants of our communities. Inexpensive, widely available products should not be obtained at the cost of exploitation and pain: those ends cannot justify those means. Accordingly,

- We strongly support other organizations with an explicit and positive social and environmental commitment.
- We strongly support initiatives to ensure that primary producers are paid fair prices for their products.
- We strongly support the raising of animals in free-range conditions without growth hormones or other unnecessary drugs.
- We condemn the raising and slaughtering of animals under inhumane conditions.
- We condemn testing products for toxicity by using animals.
- We condemn the exploitation of labour.
- We condemn the ownership and patenting of genetic material.

### **Nutritional and health considerations:**

Our decisions to buy products are also decisions to bring products and their chemical constituents, natural and otherwise, into our homes and our bodies. Whether we prefer traditional or modern diets, whether our bodies tolerate a wide or a narrow range of food, we require that food to be of high quality, nutritious, and honestly described. Accordingly,

- We strongly support the provision of full, accurate information through ingredient labels and signs.
- We strongly support the production of minimally-processed, whole foods.
- We oppose the use of artificial chemical additives or preservatives.

## **Our selection and marketing of products**

Our purpose in articulating our core values is not just to express a wish for a better world; it is to help us evaluate products, to decide whether and how to sell them.

There are several reasons why we may decide not to carry a product:

- Products are ordinarily *banned*, not available for sale at all, if our core values condemn any of the methods by which they are produced or distributed.
- Products are *boycotted* when we decide to participate in an organized campaign to exert pressure on a corporation to change its actions, by not carrying any of its products.

Although a product is not stocked, that does not necessarily mean that it has been banned or boycotted. We may stock a better alternative, we may have decided that its negatives greatly outweigh its positives, it may lie outside of Karma's traditional product selection, or it may simply not sell well enough to warrant stocking.

Products are sold as part of regular stock, but not promoted in preference to other products, if they have primarily positive characteristics and no strongly negative ones. We also recognize two important distinctions:

- Products are *de-emphasized* if they have some important negative characteristics but some redeeming positive characteristics.
  - Products are *specially promoted* if they have a particularly favourable balance of virtues.
- Products are specifically de-emphasized or specially promoted through information, labeling, display, and pricing. Especially in the de-emphasized category, such information will enable members to make informed choices about whether to purchase individual products.

The decision to ban a product may be straightforward; the harder task is to balance a product's positive and negative characteristics in the decision about whether it is to be not stocked, de-emphasized, or specially promoted. Although this policy sets out the principles for such decisions, the day-to-day practice is articulated within the Implementation Guide.

The Board and Managers may establish an explicit procedure so that, under special circumstances, a product which would ordinarily be banned will instead be stocked with the strongest possible de-emphasis, providing a full accounting of the factors considered in arriving at such a decision.

Both the Implementation Guide and the records of actions taken under its guidelines are public documents, available to all members.

## **Our commitment to action**

We recognize our range of action on these issues is not limited to our decisions about whether and how we sell specific products. We can also take these further steps:

- Our Managers can actively seek better alternatives to the banned and de-emphasized products.
- We can encourage suppliers to change their practices.
- We can encourage public policies and practices consistent with our core values.
- We can educate members and prospective members about our core values and our practices.

To fully implement this policy requires extensive research into products and the institutions that create and distribute them.

- We commit ourselves to providing the resources necessary to conduct this research.
- We seek to co-ordinate and share such research with other organizations, especially those in the co-operative movement, that share our core values.
- We commit ourselves to preparing an annual audit of our progress in fully researching the essential criteria, those critical to our decisions about whether products may be stocked.

*The text above is the product policy passed by the Karma members at the Annual General Meeting on Tuesday, 22 October 2002, including any amendments accepted by the meeting. As the text states, the policy requires work, led by the Board and the Managers, to put its principles into action, and the members have committed themselves to supplying the necessary resources for that. At the time this document was printed in December 2002, it was too early to report on any formal steps that had been taken to create or follow the Implementation Guide promised in the policy.*