

Climate-Friendly Freezers

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We are continuing our efforts to roll out energy-efficient cabinets that use climate-friendly hydrocarbon refrigerants.

Why are climate friendly freezers important?

Hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) refrigerants are greenhouse gases (GHG) that are traditionally used in freezer cabinets and other cold storage facilities. Although freezers are designed to keep refrigerants sealed inside, if released they can have a global warming impact that is significantly greater than the equivalent amount of carbon dioxide.

That's why for over a decade we have been taking action. We have pioneered the use of environmentally-friendly natural refrigerant alternatives to reduce our GHG emissions, and continue to work on innovations to make our freezers as energy-efficient as possible.

Our approach

We are the world's largest producer of ice cream with our brands – such as Wall's, Algida and Kibon – on sale in over 45 countries. With that reach comes responsibility.

We are developing new technologies to enable our retail customers to lower their GHG impact. For example, we have introduced climate-friendly refrigerants in our new cabinets and lowered the energy consumption of our most popular cabinet models.

We work with governments, NGOs, industry groups and other manufacturers to bring about further change. Together we can have an even greater influence on reducing GHG emissions.

Rolling out natural refrigerants at scale

The impact of the three million freezer cabinets we rely on to reach consumers is a significant contributor to the total GHG footprint of our ice cream business. In 2004, we started pioneering the use of hydrocarbon (HC) refrigerants in our ice cream cabinets. Since then, we have been driving a strategic agenda to reduce the carbon and energy footprint of our cabinets worldwide, engaging customers on our progress and driving a shift in industry.

By the end of 2016, we had purchased over 2.3 million freezers containing natural hydrocarbon refrigerants.

Alongside the roll out of freezer cabinets using natural refrigerants, we are also actively working on deploying cabinets with reduced energy consumption. Freezers purchased in 2016 consume on average 38% less energy versus our cabinets purchased in 2008. Some of this reduction is due to the transition to hydrocarbon refrigerants but is also due to the use of lower energy and best in class technologies. We are aiming to go further and our latest low energy freezer cabinets consume 60% less energy than the equivalent 2008 model.

“The potential for emissions reductions through the use of natural refrigeration technologies is enormous,” says Unilever CEO Paul Polman. “I would encourage everyone in the industry to go further and faster in their journey to HFC-free refrigeration systems.”

Partnering on our new technologies

Recent advances have enabled our scientists to develop point-of-sale freezers that are capable of over 60% energy reduction (using a 2008 baseline).

We place great value on investing in and exploring new technologies to help reduce our energy consumption. We consider new technical solutions in design, insulation and refrigeration systems. Some of these innovations have been deployed. Others are still being developed as we aim to take our energy reduction further through our next phase of developments.

Our progress to date has been achieved by giving consistent priority to this agenda with support across a number of business functions. Our Partner to Win (strategic) suppliers are also instrumental in delivering our vision. Working closely with them enables us to have best-in-class capabilities, sustainable practices and innovation.

Engaging our customers

Offering the most energy efficient freezer cabinets can be an important selling point for our customers.

One example is our partnership with Autogrill, one of the major players in the European and global petrol station and convenience business. Autogrill was keen to use the most environmentally-friendly technologies to help it achieve its sustainability targets, as well as reduce energy costs. We are upgrading a proportion of Autogrill's existing units each year in four European countries with our energy efficient cabinets. These communicate their green credentials to consumers via labels on the freezers.

As a result, we have also secured the best positioning of the cabinets, making it easier for consumers to select our ice creams. A critical factor in agreeing this partnership was our leadership in energy-efficient freezers.

Achieving change in the US

Prior to 2011, United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations prevented companies from using HC refrigerants. Working together with Greenpeace, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and others, our Ben & Jerry's brand submitted a formal application through the EPA's Significant New Alternatives Policy (SNAP) programme.

As a result, the EPA approved use of HC climate-friendly refrigerants in ice cream cabinets. This ruling paved the way for other companies to take advantage of the significant GHG savings these cabinets offer.

We have now purchased over 18,000 hydrocarbon ice cream cabinets for the US.

Refrigerants, Naturally!

We are a founder member of Refrigerants, Naturally!, a multi-stakeholder group established in 2004, and supported by Greenpeace and UNEP. It aims to promote a rapid shift away from the use of HFCs towards natural refrigerants such as ammonia and carbon dioxide. It also promotes the use of climate-friendly HCs for refrigerated point-of-sale equipment such as ice cream freezers and beverage coolers. Between 2010 and 2013, Unilever chaired Refrigerants, Naturally!

In 2014, during the European Commission's review of commercial refrigeration, Refrigerants, Naturally! members advocated for change and succeeded in having damaging HFCs banned from many commonly-used types of freezers with effect from 2022.

In 2016, the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol was agreed in Rwanda. This has created the opportunity to phase down the use of HFC refrigerants – especially those with the highest global warming potential – under the treaty established to phase out substances such as CFCs which were identified as being responsible for creating the 'hole' in the ozone layer. Refrigerants Naturally members had been active in advocating for this amendment, which we hope will accelerate the take up of natural refrigerants around the world.

Extending our ambition through the Consumer Goods Forum

We also work to overcome barriers to the wide-scale adoption of more climate-friendly refrigerants through the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF). This uses its collective influence to encourage suppliers to develop natural refrigerant technologies that are able to meet the growing demand for refrigeration and air conditioning worldwide. The combined influence and reach of the organisations involved means that there is huge potential to change behaviour across industries and governments.

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