

Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill

Environmental Issues: Food and Agriculture

Food is simply too good to waste. Even the most sustainably farmed food does us no good if the food is never eaten. Getting food to our tables eats up 10 percent of the total U.S. energy budget, uses 50 percent of U.S. land, and swallows 80 percent of freshwater consumed in the United States. Yet, 40 percent of food in the United States today goes uneaten. That is more than 20 pounds of food per person every month. Not only does this mean that Americans are throwing out the equivalent of \$165 billion each year, but also 25 percent of all freshwater and huge amounts of unnecessary chemicals, energy, and land. Moreover, almost all of that uneaten food ends up rotting in landfills where it accounts for almost 25 percent of U.S. methane emissions.

Nutrition is also lost in the mix -- food saved by reducing losses by just 15 percent could feed more than 25 million Americans every year at a time when one in six Americans lack a secure supply of food to their tables. Given all the resources demanded for food production, it is critical to make sure that the least amount possible is needlessly squandered on its journey to our plates.

Identifying Efficiency Losses in the U.S. Food System

This paper examines the inefficiencies in the U.S. food system from the farm to the fork to the landfill. By identifying food losses at every level of the food supply chain, this report provides the latest recommendations and examples of emerging solutions, such as making "baby carrots" out of carrots too bent (or "curvy") to meet retail standards. By increasing the efficiency of our food system, we can make better use of our natural resources, provide financial saving opportunities along the entire supply chain, and enhance our ability to meet food demand.

The average American consumer wastes 10 times as much food as someone in Southeast Asia, up 50 percent from Americans in the 1970s. This means there was once a time when we wasted far less, and we can get back there again. Doing so will ultimately require a suite of coordinated solutions, including changes in supply-chain operation, en-

hanced market incentives, increased public awareness and adjustments in consumer behavior.

Much can be learned from work that is already under way in Europe. Both the United Kingdom and the European Union have conducted research to better understand the drivers of the problem and identify potential solutions. In January 2012, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to reduce food waste by 50 percent by 2020 and designated 2014 as the "European year against food waste." An extensive U.K. public awareness campaign called "Love Food Hate Waste" has been conducted over the past five years and 53 of the leading food retailers and brands there have adopted a resolution to reduce waste in their own operations, as well as upstream and downstream in the supply chain.



Gains can be made quickly. In just five years, avoidable household food waste in the United Kingdom has been reduced 18 percent. The complexity of the issue cannot be ignored. At the heart are two basic realities that must be acknowledged upfront. The first is that food represents a small portion of many Americans' budgets, making the financial cost of wasting food too low to outweigh the convenience of it. Second, there is the plain economic truth that the more food consumers waste, the more those in the food industry are able to sell. This is true throughout the supply chain where waste downstream translates to higher sales for anyone upstream. Overcoming these challenges as well as the other drivers of food waste discussed in this document will require all hands on deck from the U.S. government to consumers to business. It will also require raising the priority of reducing food waste to the significant level it merits.

Working Toward More Efficiencies in the Food Supply System

The time to act is now. In fact, a recent report by consulting firm McKinsey ranks reducing food waste as one of the top three opportunities to improve resource productivity. Key prospects for change agents include:

- The U.S. government should conduct a comprehensive study for food losses in our food system and establish national goals for food waste reduction. One key action will be to standardize and clarify the meaning of date labels on food so that consumers stop throwing out items due to misinterpretation. A waste reduction organization in the United Kingdom has estimated this type of clarification could prevent about 20 percent of wasted food in households.
- State and local governments should lead by setting targets and implementing food waste prevention campaigns in their jurisdictions as well as their own operations. One key opportunity for this is education alongside municipal composting programs.
- Businesses should start by understanding the extent and opportunity of their own waste streams and adopting best practices. For example, Stop and Shop was able to save an estimated \$100 million annually after an analysis of freshness, shrink, and customer satisfaction in their perishables department.
- Americans can help reduce waste by learning when food goes bad, buying imperfect produce, and storing and cooking food with an eye to reducing waste.

Increasing the efficiency of the U.S. food system is a triple bottom-line solution that requires a collective approach by decision-makers at every level in the supply chain. Investing in these food waste reduction strategies, together we can reap the tremendous social benefits of alleviating hunger, the environmental benefits of efficient resource use, and the financial benefits of significant cost savings.

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