

Face the Waste: Eat food, don't throw it out

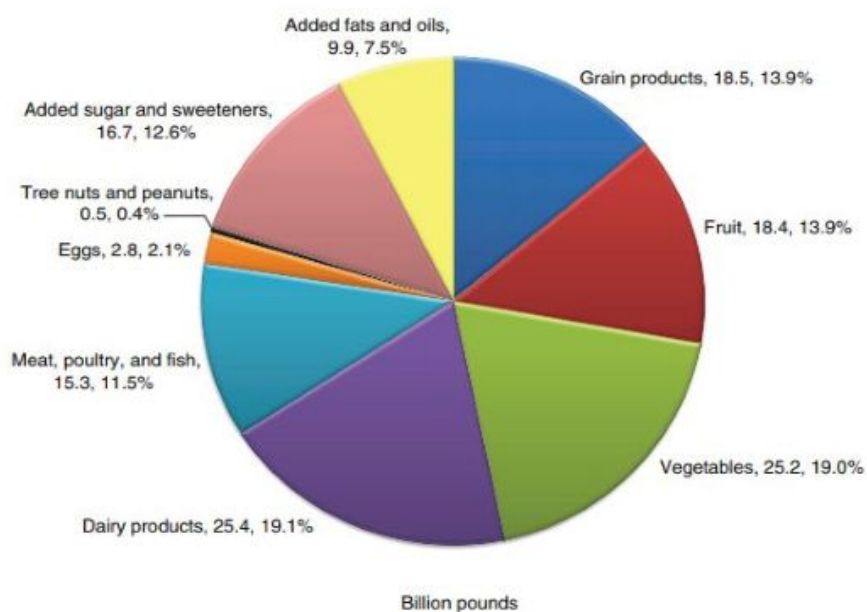
There are four steps to getting food onto our plates: growing, processing, retailing, and consuming. In America, each of these steps includes more and more food waste. According to the National Resources Defence Council, 40% of America's food is wasted. During a time when 1 in 6 Americans is having trouble feeding themselves (Feeding America, 2010) we could be feeding 875 million people if we just cut our household waste in half (Gunders, 2012). It wasn't always like this, though. Even though preventing against food waste is impossible and there will be natural losses at each step, Americans have seen a time when food waste was far far lower. In the 70's our food waste was less than half of what it is today and other countries are making fast strides to returning to their previous numbers. In 2012 the United Kingdom started an aggressive campaign against food waste and already has seen a 18% reduction in household food waste. They accomplished this by investing in public awareness campaigns, working with their leading food retailers, and turning legal attention to the matter (Gunders, 2012).

We aren't the United Kingdom, however, and their aggressive tactics may not find the same success in the states. First issue is that UK's parliament made their first steps by making laws to help reduce food waste but America's government is owned by companies and food waste is in corporation's best interest. Even with these added hurdles in our way, however, that doesn't mean we're helpless. Our first step should be to decrease our own personal waste as much as possible. Meal planning, freezing, and a stricter monthly food budget can all help us reduce our wasted food (and money). Food diaries and composting can help us realize our waste and use our waste for good. Composted material makes for good fertilizer so either you could use it yourself or donate to farms! The University of Illinois encourages using composted material as fertilizer because it increases the soil's water retention and help recycle vitamins. According to them, compost can be ready to use as fertilizer in as little as 3 months so more than enough time to bulk up between growing seasons. (UI, 2018). Another easy step individual Americans can do to decrease food waste is to be willing to buy imperfect items. Be aware that trying to choose a perfectly round and pretty apple means that 20 more apples are being thrown away and wasted.

Produce is the highest wasted food at the farming level. According to an estimate by Feeding America, more than 6 billion pounds of fresh produce go unharvested or unsold each year (Weinfield, 2014). Some of these losses come from farmer's overproducing, picky consumers, or lack of harvesting resources. Farmers often overproduce and overproduce by a lot because it is extremely difficult to plan out how much of a crop will actually grow to full harvest. Once they do grow, attacks on immigrant farm hands sometimes create for a farm the situation of harvesting the crops not being worth what they can sell them for. Then, even after everything's

been grown and harvested, there is still waste caused by selection. Ripeness is one of the things harvesters look for in produce to pass the test and is a relevant health factor in food but other factors such as shape, size, and color can be cosmetic issues caused by consumers pickiness. (Weinfield, 2014). Making consumers aware of what impact their decisions make is a huge factor in ending this needless waste but until the day everyone realizes the uselessness of a completely ripe tomato we need to encourage farmers to think around the system. Such as one farmer saw that 70% of his carrots were going to waste because of customer pickiness and decided to rebrand them as baby carrots. He was then even able to sell them at more than double the price of regular carrots per pound (Gunders, 2012). Other systems like farmer’s markets discourage customer’s pickiness and show consumers what normal produce can look like. After harvesting comes packing. Packing houses make their own personal test of produce resulting, again, in waste for mainly cosmetic reasons. Improper storage and handling also adds to waste and produce is often the casualty because it’s fast expiration date and unforeseeable demand. Processing is the next step and also results in its own waste. Much waste from processing is through trimming- getting rid of fats, skins, smaller pieces- that would be perfectly fine products of themselves. This loss could be substantially cut by returning to the system of local delis and butchers who, historically, would make use of such after products instead of wasting them. Another benefit to leaving foods whole through the retail process is that whole foods are not held to the same “expiration” system as packaged and ready foods (Gunders, 2012). Retail’s first waste is in distribution. The same as with production, storage and handling are a major cause of waste. In-store food losses in the United States totaled an estimated 43 billion pounds in 2008 (Buzby, 2015). The USDA estimates that supermarkets lose \$15 billion annually in unsold fruits and vegetables alone.

Estimated total amount of food loss in the United States by food group, 2010



Even some of the most conscientious and informed buyers cause food waste justifying it with a reason most of us were taught to agree with: sell by dates. “Sell by” or “expiration” dates are printed on almost every edible product in a store. These dates are not required by law and generally don’t have anything to do with a food’s edibility but most Americans still use it as a cut-and-dry rule (Kirkpatrick, 2017). The only product that’s expiration date is important enough to use as a set rule is baby formula, which is why it’s the only product federally regulated. The rest, even dairy and meat, can give you a general idea of when products may go bad but frequently result in products being thrown out long before they’re bad. To some, this is a tactic that businesses know well and use to their advantage to force us to buy more. We need to learn to use our own judgment of whether food is still edible or not. Related to this is the waste of damaged goods. Dented cans or boxes or another cosmetic damages to goods don’t affect the product at all and, unless safety seals are broken, are still perfectly edible but are thrown out because customers won’t want an imperfect item. The business doesn’t even want to try and sell it because they want an immaculate image. Image of the business is a depressing and egocentric cause of waste. Retailers like to hold the image of constantly fully stocked which means they overbuy produce and create displays overflowing with product. The product at the bottom does not get sold and often instead gets ruined by the product on top of it but is used to create a “full” look. Not only do retailers not try to avoid this waste but find it a sign of success; Doug Rauch, the former president of Trader Joe's explained that retail philosophy is “If you see a store that has really low waste in its perishables, you are worried. If a store has low waste numbers, it can be a sign that they aren't fully in stock and that the customer experience is suffering” (Jacobs, 2014). Creating a mirage of an overabundance of food ironically results in wasted food and hungry homes.

Overabundance problems don’t end there, either, as a leading reason for household waste is buying more than we need. A simple fix to this would be to avoid spending more than what’s in our budget and on our shopping lists, freeze whatever we won’t use tonight for later use, or to donate to those who need it. Other methods like meal planning, refusing to take out or bringing to-go boxes, and food sharing are good ways to reduce household waste and food costs while also helping keep you healthy (Rinkesh, 2017). Our personal goals to reduce food waste in our house are the first necessary step to ending the problem with hunger in the United States. Our dedication isn’t lost in the government’s eyes, either, since in 2015 the first governmental focus on reducing food waste was launched. The national goal is a 50% decrease in waste by 2030. The USDA and EPA are working with every step of the food latter to hopefully cut out as much waste as they can. Some tactics they’re working on are widespread education programs to help you understand the everyday choices you make that lead to waste, investing in technology that can create less waste, creating incentives and encouraging donations (USDA, 2018). Governments in a more local sense are also stepping up to help encourage change. Like California, Arizona, Oregon, and Colorado passing laws to allow growers to receive tax credit

for donations so that the excess or “imperfect” crops that we spoke about going to waste would instead feed mouths of those in need. All of these steps are steps in the right direction and hopefully the USDA and EPA will help America stop wasting food.

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